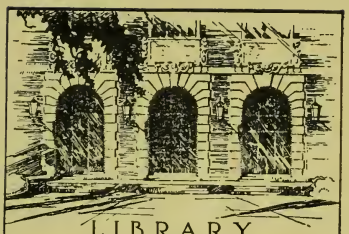

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MAURICE DURANT.

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BY

CHARLES GARVICE,

AUTHOR OF "ONLY COUNTRY LOVE," "EVE," &c.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
A. SMITH, 334, STRAND, W.C.
1875.

LONDON :
PRINTED BY BEVERIDGE AND CO.,
FULWOOD'S RENTS, HOLBORN.

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CHAPTER I.

"Too fierce a joy doth strike as hard as grief."

TOWARDS the end of November, and one night when the rain beat hard across the moor, and the wind howled dismally through the bare, shivering trees, the master of the Rectory sat in his antique, darksome chamber, gazing at the red, expiring fire.

Seated on one of the old high-backed carved-oak chairs, black with age, yet strong as wrought-iron, his grand head threw a grotesque shadow upon the dark wainscot, flitting to and fro in the fitful glare of the wax candles, like some spectral copy of one of Angelo's noble figures.

On the table, within reach of his hand, which

wearily upheld his head, stood a flagon of wine, though the slender Venetian glass showed that as yet it had been untouched.

At his feet the huge mastiff lay stretched at full length, like a lioness at rest.

By the side of the chair leant his gun, and on a chair beside the table his cap and a dead hare.

From the heavy lines upon his forehead one might guess that sad thoughts occupied his mind; for some time his eyes were fixed upon the waning fire, his lips compressed and silent; then a gust of wind, wild and more savage than its fellows, burst against the diamond-paned window. He turned his head with a weary sigh, and, stooping, flung a heavy log of wood amongst the red embers.

"A wild night," he muttered to himself. "Just such another night as the one when I returned to this desolate home of mine. Just such another when I blighted my life by carrying her off. How the time flies. Eight

years! They seem only eight months sometimes, eight centuries at others. I wonder where she is now—in some Roumanian city, perhaps, the toast of some crowned idiot, snared by her deceitful eye and evil voice.

"Felise! The name has a bad ring in it; it savours of the tiger. Felise, Faustine! Both names of shame—both hers. Bah! What brings me in this mood to-night? Is't the wind, or the want of wine?" and he stretched out his hand to reach the flagon.

"Wine! How marvellous that I should not have gone the way of many others, and drowned my shame and my broken heart in the fumes of the grape-juice. There was a time when even that seemed a bright hope, a haven of forgetfulness, in the midst of my agony. But no; Maurice Durant was a Durant still, and deemed it better to grin and bear than drink and die. Besides, had I not one great consolation, a Mother whose bosom received my aching head, whose joys consoled my breaking

heart? Art! thou only mother I have ever known, I drink with the deepest reverence to thee."

And, touching the glass with his lips, he rose, and, pressing a hidden spring behind a picture which frowned on the side of the room, a secret panel slid back, and he passed through the aperture disclosed.

Holding up the candle, he looked round upon a room barely lighted by its rays, strewed from end to end with pictures, finished and unfinished, great and small, landscapes and seascapes, historical studies and portraits.

Standing motionless for a moment, he walked to the easel, and, turning a picture, gazed with a flashing eye and fast-heaving chest upon the face of a young girl, bright with the liveliness of youth and purity, tender with the softness of love and innocent passion.

"It speaks!" he breathed, almost painfully. "It is the child herself. Oh, God! thou dost

punish me heavily with this love of mine—heavily, heavily!"

Then his head sank upon his breast, and muttering, "Maud, Maud!" he strode slowly back into the other room, carefully closing the panel behind him.

As he sank into the chair again, into the same attitude of mournful reverie, the dog rose and pricking up its ears growled threateningly.

Maurice Durant, who knew that the noble creature never gave signs in vain, bent down and stroked it; and the dog, after listening for a moment, dropped into its old position with its head laid low upon the ground and its large eyes fixed upon the door.

Maurice Durant listened attentively for a moment, but, hearing nothing save the wind, leant his head upon his hands and fell into an uneasy slumber.

Meanwhile a heavily cloaked horseman was urging his steed at a dashing pace across the moor, and at the moment the dog uttered its

warning had pulled up before the little path leading to the Rectory door.

"Phew!" he muttered, leaping down and unfastening the gate. "The place looks like a dead-house, a home for spirits, a prison, a—our Lady knows what not that's miserable and ghost-like. I'm half inclined to throw the business up, or postpone it to a more propitious season. Sh-sh! It's the drenching rain, the biting wind, the bitter blast which daunts thee, Spazzola. Get thee on through it, for if thou failest to-night thy fortune's lost, and if thou hittest, well then—ah, what's that? Purgatory! my flesh is on the creep and my soul's like water! That light must be in a window. Ah, ah! my Lucian, thou art fairly in the hunter's toils at last. Thou eel, thou jelly-fish, thou slip-'tween-fingers, thou—— What an idiot art thou, Spazzola, to waste thy time in rant when thou shouldst act. Now I'll tie thee here, my weary, bespattered one, and on to my mission."

So saying, he led the horse under as much shelter as the trees afforded, and, fastening its bridle to a branch, hurried up to the house on foot.

Maurice Durant was startled from his brief sleep by a loud ringing of the long-silent house-bell. Hastening to his feet, half assured that it was the trick of a dream, he seized his gun and called the dog.

It wanted no call. With head thrown back and its eyes flashing, it waited for the opening of the door to dash at the intruder whomsoever it might be.

In another moment the great bell rang out again, accompanied by a loud knocking on the worm-eaten panels of the great hall-door.

Clutching his gun, his eyes flashing like the dog's, Maurice Durant, whispering a word to Tigris, which kept it silent at its heels, noiselessly unlocked the door and stepped out upon the corridor.

As he did so the old mute met him, and

eagerly asked in signs if she should open the door.

He answered her also by signs in the affirmative, touching his gun significantly to intimate that he was at hand to protect her against all ill.

Then he strode to the huge balustrade, and, pointing his gun at the door with his finger on the trigger, and remaining couched in the attitude to spring down the stairs he waited.

Slowly the old woman crawled along the tesselated hall, throwing fantastic shadows on its pictured sides, and, after some time spent in unfastening the door chain and bolts, cautiously opened the door.

A gust of wind blew her candle out, carefully as her quivering hand had sought to shield it, and a man's voice, sounding muffled and indistinct, exclaimed:

"Give this to your master, the Senor Lucian, and tell him I return good for evil."

Maurice Durant, at the sound of the voice,

uttered a faint cry, and clutched the balustrade. Then, recovering, gave the word to the dog, who, opening its huge mouth with a ferocious yell, sprang down the stairs and at the door.

But the old woman had closed it with terrified swiftness, and before Maurice Durant could open it again the sound of a flying horse's hoofs told him that pursuit would be useless.

Relighting the candle, the old woman, as white with terror as her yellow skin would allow her to be, held out a stained and crumpled letter to her master.

"Is this all?" he signed.

She answered, "Yes," with her long, bony hands, and Maurice Durant taking it called the dog and strode up the stairs again.

Re-entering his chamber, he caught at the flagon and drank a draught of wine, then, thrusting out his strong, sinewy hand before him, he regarded it with a stern frown until its tremor had ceased and it was firm again, then tore open the damp, weather-stained envelope.

Once more he paused in an effort to regain his old stern serenity, and stood gazing with tightly clenched lips and lowered brows upon the envelope; slowly, calmly, he extracted a slip of paper, unfolded it, and read it, then, with a cry that a soul emancipated from hell might utter, fell fainting across the table, in the very spot, on the very same night of the year, where Gerald, his father, had fallen, clutching in his hand, as did he, a piece of paper.

The news of his son's marriage and dishonour had stunned the father; the tidings of the woman's death had felled the son.

Let us bend over the unconscious form and learn for ourselves what it was that had stunned him as if with a blow.

It was a small piece of foreign paper, bearing the official heading of a small Italian province.

Within its ruled lines ran, in a priest's crabbed handwriting, these words, in Italian:

"Felise Faustine—surname unknown—aged

about 28 or 29, died the twentieth day of —, 18—. Was buried in the cemetery of this village by me, Baptiste Verox.

(Signed)

" Baptiste Verox, Vicar of San Prestari.

" Claud Loraire, Sexton of San Prestari."

CHAPTER II.

"Our love has brought us naught but sorrow,
Now Heaven forfend it brings no sin."

CLARENCE HOUSE—Lord Crownbrilliants's villa, in Park Lane—was one blaze of light, for it was the night of the Crownbrilliants' ball.

Lady Crownbrilliants had become the fashion, Clarence House the rage, and her *soirées* the most sought after and desired.

By what means she had reached to the proud position of leader of ton it would be difficult to say. The men declared it was because she was the most beautiful and regal of women. The women whispered that the Crownbrilliants wealth explained it. Let the reason be what it might, there was no disputing the fact—

though many envious ladies were dying to do so—that Lady Crownbrilliants' assemblies, dinners, and balls were the best and most brilliantly attended of any held within the charmed circle of the Upper Ten.

To-night was the grand ball of the season. The list of expected guests comprised the *crême de la crême* of the nobility, and included—so it was whispered—Royal blood.

The magnificent drawing-rooms and ball-rooms, fitted up with princely gorgeousness, had been decorated with flowers and perfumed by a novel process. The band was to perform within a little grotto of ferns and fountains. The conservatories were thrown open and illuminated, the choice singing birds fluttering now and then into the brilliant world of gas and music, but speedily flying back to their cool retreats, dazzled by the light and heat.

Every luxury that could be devised had been procured, and no expense had been

spared to make the Clarence House ball the great event of the season.

An hour before the time appointed for the opening, the countess, already decked out in her ball costume, sat silent and alone in the little pink Paradise called my lady's drawing-room.

With the soft light of the Etruscan lamp playing upon her perfect features, and glistening on her magnificent dress, she looked superlatively lovely, yet very sad.

With a suddenness that made her start—for the Countess Crownbrilliants was less firm of nerve and more given to starting and trembling than Carlotta Lawley—a knock came softly on the panel of the rosewood door, and, in answer to her ladyship's "Come in," her own maid entered and announced that Mr. Chichester waited admission.

Her ladyship having given permission, the next minute Chudleigh Chichester entered the room.

If she was changed so was he.

He looked old, somewhat more worn, and a great deal more eager, excitable and anxious.

"Carlotta!" he cried, in a low, glad voice, almost springing to her side, and pressing her soft white hand to his lips. "I knew you would see me! How beautiful you look—oh, Heaven, how beautiful!" and he drew back a step to gaze at her now flushed face and downcast eyes.

"Have you come from the House?" she said, looking up at him with eyes in which love shone with a dim, wistful pain that proclaimed at once its guilt and unguiltiness.

"Yes," he said, sinking down by her side and still holding her hand, "but I am going back directly. You said I might come for a few minutes before the ball, and I could not stay away. I am going back directly."

There was something piteous in the wistful helplessness of his low, thrilling tones, and the countess's eyes filled with tears.

"You will be at the ball to-night?" she asked, eagerly.

"I speak to-night," he said, wearily. "I don't think——"

"You must," she said, tremulously. "Oh, come, if only for a few minutes."

"I will," he said, simply. "You will save me a dance?"

She nodded.

"Two if you like."

"Two, then!" he said, eagerly.

Then there followed a short silence, both sitting gazing at the opposite wall and listening to each other's breathing with that restful, glorious stillness and repose which alone kept their love from driving them mad.

Then he rose.

"Time is up, Carlotta," he whispered, bending over her until his breath dimmed the tiara on her brow. "I must go. I seem to have been here only a second"—and he sighed—"good-bye——"

"Till what time?" she asked, earnestly.

"Till two o'clock."

"Good-bye!" and she walked with him to the door.

"Lady Mildred and Maud are coming about twelve," he said, as he opened it. "I begged them to come earlier, but Maudie had a headache and intended lying down. Good-bye till two—keep me two dances, remember."

At that moment a footstep which Carlotta knew only too well sounded along the corridor, and, starting with a sudden pallor, she grasped Chudleigh's arm to draw him into the room again.

But he—his face darkening—whispered:

"No, no; let me go out," and stepped out into the corridor.

"Hullo, Ch-Ch-Chichester," hiccupped as well as stammered his lordship—he had been dining and drinking heavily. "What the deuce do you mean by d-d-deserting the Hou-House, eh? Ha! ha!"

Chudleigh tried to smile, but his face only grew heavier.

"I came out for a breath of air, and looked in as I passed," he said.

"Th-hat's wight," hiccupped my lord. "Seen Carlotta? She's t-t-togging herself up for this con-confounded ball. Beastly wot, I c-c-call it. I hate b-balls. I say, old f-fellow, I've had a tewwible let down over that howwible handicap. L-lost a hatful."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Chudleigh, burning at his coarse allusion to the woman whom he loved and reverenced, but whom this man—her husband—had grown to regard in the light of a superb piece of furniture or a thoroughbred horse.

"S-so was I," laughed his lordship. "I'm hanged if I've pulled a s-single event off lately. Fwightful l-luck — fwightful! W-where's Carlotta?"

"I do not know," answered Chudleigh, with some truth, for he could not tell whether she

had stayed in the drawing-room or gone into the adjoining chamber.

"D-don't know!" retorted his lordship, whose tipsy mood was ready on the slightest provocation to change from the good to the bad-tempered. "H-haven't you just l-left her? hic!"

"Yes," said Chudleigh, walking away and trying to keep the contempt raging in his heart from becoming manifest in his tones. "I left her in the drawing-room."

"Ah!" said his lordship, "th-there you are, you see. Why couldn't you say so?" and he stared with drunken gravity after the retreating figure of his unhappy, unsuccessful rival, adding, with a ponderous shake of the head, "Y-you're a g-good d-deal too much with her l-ladyship, Mr. C-Chichester. I'll—— Where's the countess?" he broke off to ask of the lady's-maid, who at that moment came out of one of the rooms.

"In her room dressing, my lord," replied the

woman, with prompt glibness, and his lordship, not daring to penetrate the *sanctum* of her whom he had ceased to love but not to fear, stumbled down stairs again.

The countess, who had stood trembling behind the door of the drawing-room, where she could hear every word, threw herself on the couch in an agony of despair and remorse as her husband's shuffling, uncertain footsteps followed the steady, stern ones of the man it was her agony to love.

One o'clock and the ball is in full swing, the room one flash of brilliant light and colour, the air laden with perfume, and thick with the delicious strains of a fashionable band.

The "Lancers" have just been gone through. Couples are gliding off to the cool conservatories, others in search of ices and frozen wines.

Mammas with marriageable daughters are on the tip-toe of anxiety respecting their charges.

Politicians are discussing in little knots in corners and alcoves.

A group of assiduous courtiers crowd round the royal personage who lights up the illustrious assemblage with the sunlight of his presence, and the countess is gliding to and fro, with her lovely face all in a sweet and pleasant smile, forgetting no one, neglecting nothing of the duty that falls upon the shoulders of the hostess.

"The countess is looking grand to-night," remarked Lord Hawthorn to his friend the Marquis of Hawtry, with whom he was drinking some champagne in a cool recess.

"Magnificent!" assented the marquis. "Can't make that woman out, though. I believe," and his voice here sank to a whisper, "that there's something wrong—or will be if Crownbrilliants doesn't look sharp."

"Eh? what, with young Chich——"

"Hush! no names!" interrupted the marquis, cautiously looking round as he spoke. "You never can tell who's on the other side of a shrubbery."

"But you don't mean——?" asked Lord Hawthorn, aghast.

"In other words, yes—afraid so. Crownbrilliants regularly cut him out—overbid him, you know. It's always the way—always. Look at the Countess Flinart, Lady Markington, and —oh, a host of others. It's a dreadful thing, but, mind, I feel for her more than I do for Crownbrilliants. He's gone all wrong lately. Getting turfy, and drinks—whew!—like a fish. He was always fond of the bottle, you know, but kept it quiet until after his marriage. Now he's let the painter go, and is as far adrift as a man can be without going down, all hands aboard. Hush! There they go. That's he whose arm she's leaning on. Handsome fellow, and making his way in the House. It's a deuced bad job!"

Chudleigh had arrived, and the marquis was quite right when he said he saw the countess leaning on his arm.

"You are tired," he said, as they strolled

through the cool, refreshing world of flowers and ferns. "Rest here a little while."

She sank into the little nook he pointed out to her, and leant against the rock beside her, his dark, earnest eyes fastened upon her sad, lovely face.

"Shall I get you anything?" he whispered.

She shook her head.

"No. I want nothing but a little rest. Oh, Chudleigh, Chudleigh, if you knew how weary I am, how weary! Would to God I were dead!"

He was on his knee beside her, his face white, his lips working.

"Hush, hush, my darling. You will kill me! Dead! What should I do if you were——?" and he shuddered. "I cannot speak the word. Oh, Carlotta, Carlotta, my darling! I am going mad! I am dying with the daily longing, the daily despair! Oh, my love, my love, what is to be done? What—Carlotta!"—he broke off with a sudden gasp—"Carlotta, there is one thing left. We cannot endure it longer.

It kills me to think that you are bound to him! Oh, Heaven! I shall go mad, my darling! Fly from him! Fly!——"

She started to her feet with a shudder and a suppressed scream.

"Go, go, go!" she breathed. "Take me to Maud—gentle Maud—or I am lost!"

He rose and she grasped his arm.

He trembled and grew pale.

The mere mention of his sister's name had shown him the deadliness of his temptation, and caused a revulsion of feeling.

"Come," he said, and led her through the conservatory into the room again — her face still a little white, though the smile had returned to it.

In a quiet, cool corner they found Maud attended on by a gray-haired colonel, whose voice and hands were soft and tender as a woman's, notwithstanding he had assisted to carry the heaviest and most frightful of the redoubts at dread Balaklava.

Maud was very little better for her Christmas in town, though it was far on in May.

Sir Fielding had still remained in London, for the doctors had assured him that there was nothing physically wrong with his dearly loved daughter, and the gentle girl's ailment was mental, though in what shape they did not, perhaps because they would not, say.

In compliance with their advice, Sir Fielding had plunged into gaiety and fashion, hoping that every ball and every opera would serve to dispel the unwonted sadness and paleness that had visited his Maud.

She made room for Carlotta beside her with a sweet smile, that came at once as balm and additional force to the countess's troubled soul, and Chudleigh strode off to get the cool night air upon his brow from one of the terraces.

"Well, dear Carlotta, have you been dancing much?" she asked, taking her hand, but adding before Carlotta could answer: "How hot

your hand is! It burns like fire. Are you not well?"

"Yes, yes, my dear!" replied Carlotta. "The room is hot, and I am rather tired. Are you not warm?"

"Yes, but not like this," said Maud, gently lifting the hand and laying it against her cheek. "It is like a coal. Are you ill?"

"No, no," replied Carlotta, wearily. "Not ill, Maudie; only tired—only tired."

"Can we not go on the terrace a little while?" Maud asked of the colonel.

"Will you let me take you?" he said, with delighted gallantry.

Taking the two on his arm, he led them to the terrace.

"It is cool here," said Maud.

"I will get you an ice," said the colonel, hurrying away.

"Now, Carlotta, dear," said Maud, putting her arm round her waist, and drawing the unhappy woman to her soft, gentle bosom.

"Tell me, really and truthfully, are you not ill?"

Carlotta covered her eyes with her hands for a moment, then, in her turn, drew Maud toward her, and, looking into her eyes, said, almost hoarsely:

"Ill? ill? are we not both ill, child, with the same disease—love?"

And as Maud shrank from her grasp with a crimson flush she glided into the room again, leaving Maud, panting and breathless, face to face with her own heart upon the terrace.

What did Carlotta mean? Was it possible that she had read her secret, looked into her heart and seen the image of the being enshrined there?

Her secret!—hers no longer, since another shared it. Then she wept, but fell to trembling as she thought of Carlotta herself, and half annoyed, half frightened closed her eyes, and shut from her heart the fearful thoughts and dread that had just entered it, murmuring:

"No, no, Chudleigh is too good—too good."

Then, hearing the footsteps of the colonel approaching, she withdrew to another part of the balcony, for her heart was too full to bear any one near her.

So leaning against the marble balustrade, her sweet face upon her hand, she stayed for nearly an hour looking into the world of stars, thinking of that other starlit, moonlight night, when the heavens had seemed glorious to her with a fresh glory born of the sound of one sweet, grave voice and the touch of his strong yet gentle arms, and listening to the bursts of music that came fitfully through the high window into the night air.

Suddenly while she sat there, motionless and rapt, a nameless yet distinct commotion in the room behind aroused her, and, rising with a sigh, she walked silently toward one of the windows.

When she reached it she could see that a waltz had just been finished, and that the hot

and flushed dancers instead of walking to and fro, and straggling out into the terraces or into the conservatory, were standing looking at a group of persons, amongst them Lord and Lady Crownbrilliants and her aunt, collected round a tall figure, whose head rose above the surrounding ones.

She recognised the face instantly, notwithstanding a certain strange change about it, and her heart gave a sudden leap that made her turn faint, and cling to the pillar of the window for support.

In the giddy ringing in her ears she heard some one near her say:

"Look, that is he—that is Lucian, the greatest painter and musician and the most marvellous man of the age, I think. See what a grand head—it's like a Roman emperor's. Mistaken! not I—Maurice Durant, a country clergyman—not a bit of it. I tell you it is Lucian, the painter; I have seen him scores of times in Venice and Rome. Talk about romance——"

Maud heard no more, for she moved to the terrace and turned her face to the stars.

Was she asleep or dreaming?

The buzzing increased—came nearer. She could hear his voice. It was changed, its sternness had gone; there was a light, musical ring, a certain joyous freedom about it that made her weep—she could not tell why.

She would not faint, though at every word of the ringing voice her soul seemed growing larger, and her senses less distinct.

The music bursting out drowned the voice.

A footstep—his—sounded behind her. She turned, caught one glimpse of his grand, splendid face, lit up with a glorious smile, heard her name breathed—then swooned of pure delight and excess of joy.

* * * * * *

CHAPTER III.

"This is the fairy promise of a happier time."

BEFORE half an hour had passed the news had spread that the unknown artist of the great pictures the world had been marvelling at for the last ten years had suddenly come to light, and was in the room, and speedily the Countess and my Lord Crownbrilliants were besieged by eager requests for an introduction, while the uninitiated were trying to get out of the confusion which his two names threw their minds into.

How could Lucian, the painter and musician, be the Reverend Maurice Durant, the Rector of Grassmere?

Lady Crownbrilliants could give her numer-

ous inquirers no information. She had only known Maurice Durant as Maurice Durant, and until the discovery had been made by a great traveller and art patron in the room, had not been aware of his identity. Neither could she satisfy her friends with an introduction, for Maurice Durant, or Lucian, could not be found.

But when the excitement and curiosity had somewhat ceased, the curtains on the balcony were thrown aside, and he appeared with Lady Mildred and Maud on either arm.

Of course he was surrounded at once, but, recluse as they thought him, he showed by his ready wit and the ease with which he disengaged himself from the crowd without giving offence, a knowledge of the world and its tactics that startled and surprised Lady Mildred.

Several artists, who recognised him as the silent painter at Venice, came forward and shook hands, and asked eagerly of his adventures and his whereabouts, but he parried their

questions with some light answer and a winning smile, and at last made his way to the hall.

As he stood bareheaded beside the carriage door, helping Lady Mildred and Maud to enter, a dark figure stepped from beneath the laurels and stood observing him.

When the carriage had rolled away the dark Italian face of the watcher lit up with a sardonic smile, and the red lips murmured:

"Soh, soh; all goes merry as a marriage bell! Oh, my Lucian, I have thee beautifully! Well shalt thou pay for thy shot and my riddled arm. Beautifully! Beautifully!"

On their way to Grosvenor Square Lady Mildred sat staring at him as if he had been a spectre, occasionally dropping her eyes to Maud's happy, dreamy face and her hand, which lay tightly clasped in the strong one of Maurice Durant's, and it was not until they had arrived home, and found Sir Fielding still up and reading in the drawing-room, that she recovered her presence of mind.

To say that Sir Fielding was surprised is to give his astonishment a mild name.

"Maurice Durant!" he exclaimed, too startled to extend his hand, but recovering quickly enough to grasp the one held out to him.

"Aye! Maurice Durant, Sir Fielding! I do not wonder at your surprise. A bear in damask dancing at a fair is not a stranger sight than Maurice Durant at a ball. Your eyes ask for an explanation. I will give you one to-morrow — to-day rather — your timepiece strikes three," and a light, happy smile broke over his grand face.

Sir Fielding looked first at Maud and then at him again, for his joyous smile was reflected in her lovely, blushing face.

"But—but——"

"Ah, Sir Fielding!" exclaimed Maurice Durant, laying his hand upon Sir Fielding's shoulder. "Give me till the sun has risen. Ask me to dine with you—tell me I am welcome to your house, your home, your——"

He stopped, sent one glance from his dark eyes at the motionless form of Maud, and then went on, quickly:

"For I am free to accept! Free! Free! Free!" he repeated, throwing up his hands and shaking his mass of brown hair with a laugh that rang through the room. "Free! You, Sir Fielding, see the word makes four letters, and means—well, free!—at liberty. To me it means all the universe—life! happiness! love! Bah! I am talking enigmas. Give me till sunrise—till dinner-time, and then——"

Sir Fielding looked at Lady Mildred, but she threw up her hands and shook her head. He looked at Maud, and she quivered, flushed, burst into tears and sprang to his heart. Maurice Durant drew himself to his full height and smiled—ah, what a smile!

"Sir Fielding," he cried, "you hold against your breast the rarest gem that Heaven ever gave to earth—the sweetest jewel that shall

ever deck its throne! I come a few hours later to ask you to give me your gem—your precious jewel. Until then let her rest upon your breast, as, if God's mercy go so far, she shall evermore rest on mine."

Then he strode forward, bent his head till the lips touched Maud's tiny hand, and, with a regal bow to Sir Fielding and Lady Mildred, was gone; Maud at the same moment tearing herself from her astounded father's arms and flying to her own room.

"What, in the name of Heaven, does all this mean, Mildred?" asked Sir Fielding, sinking into a chair.

"Don't ask me, Fielding," replied Lady Mildred, breathlessly. "I don't know. Did you ever see such a change in your life? He looks five years younger, and quite another man. You should have seen him at the Countess's; the whole room was in an uproar. Everybody knew him, or wanted to know him."

"What!" said Sir Fielding, getting more puzzled every moment.

"Yes," went on Lady Mildred. "He came into the room about two o'clock, looking like a prince, his long hair brushed off his face, which is a remarkable one, is it not? He came in alone, no one with him, and caught sight of me as I sat beside a window for the air. I didn't know him, scarcely, he looked so much thinner. He's been ill, very ill, I can see. Besides, I couldn't believe my senses. Fancy what you would have thought yourself, Fielding, if you had seen him enter a room quite suddenly, dressed as he is to-night, and looking so happy and different to what he used to be. Well, he left me all of amaze, and I saw him go up to Carlotta. Directly after that some one in the room recognised him as the painter of those pictures you've been wondering about so much, and immediately a crowd—you know how they throng round one, Fielding—surrounded him. Well,

I lost sight of him, and, getting over my astonishment—it really upset me—I began to look for Maudie. Couldn't find her anywhere! Oh, dear me! I hunted everywhere—that dear creature, the Countess Fondimere, too—but no, she wasn't to be found. At last, in a corner of the terrace, I came upon Maurice Durant with Maudie upon his arm. You might have knocked me down with a feather, Fielding," and Lady Mildred began to cry with excitement. "I went up to him, but before I could say a word he looked up calm and cool, with that lifting of the eyebrows he always had, and said: 'Looking for your flower, Lady Mildred? Here it is, safe, sound, and lovely as ever,' and his voice sounded so beautiful with that charming foreign ring in it. Well, what could I do? Maud wouldn't say a word, and he was calm and cool, only very happy, as——well, you know; and then, before I knew where we were almost, he had made his way out of the room, got the carriage, and here we were."

"Bless me! said Sir Fielding. Bless me. Is it possible that——"

"What?" said Lady Fielding.

"That I'm going to bed, my dear Mildred," said he, and with a smile upon his puzzled face he retreated.

CHAPTER IV.

"This story will be better still untold."—BUTLER.

DINNER was over. Sir Fielding looked at Maurice Durant and then at Chudleigh, who rose and muttered something; but Maurice Durant, who was quick of eye, smiled and laid his hand on Chudleigh's arm.

"No, no, Sir Fielding; Mr. Chichester is one of us, and has more than a right to stay. Sit down again, I pray."

So Chudleigh sat down, and Sir Fielding uneasily handed the bottle.

At the time Maurice Durant was the only one calm.

Lifting his glass to his lips, he sipped it, then commenced, the Italian accent in his

earnest voice, at first very faint and hardly distinguishable, but gradually becoming stronger as he proceeded, and giving his last words a music inexpressibly subtle and touching.

"Sir Fielding, last night, or rather this morning, I promised to explain to you the strange change in my manner, and the scene that occurred at the Countess Crownbrilliants' last night. They have in Italy a proverb which says, 'Do naught before sleep.' I have slept, and in my sleep have changed my mind. With your gracious permission I will not confess—for confession it would be—the wrongs of my life, which bound me hand and foot by a chain whose links were eating into my soul when I last saw you. Ah, Sir Fielding, Mr. Chichester, you have spent your lives free from sin—from shame. I honour you. Enough. Let me tell you that my past life has been cursed by one error—one sin. Since the day I left the old Rectory, light-hearted and glad," here his voice grew low and broken, "my father—peace be to

his soul in death, I brought him none in life!—fond and proud, I have not known, till one night in this last November, one happy day. I have travelled the world to and fro—sometimes like a prince, sometimes with the poverty and hardship of a priest. I have painted in palaces in *la belle France* and in the hovels of Bohemia—ridden on the Boulevards, hunted on the prairies, and starved in the bush, in one vain endeavour to forget, to fly from the curse which hung over me till that blessed night in November when Heaven sent, amidst the wind and the rain, an angel in demon's form to lift it from my soul. Why should I give you the history of that curse? Why should I rake up the ashes of my sin, dig from the grave the secret that has been buried for years? To no purpose, to no avail. Enough that it is expiated for, that I hold the proof of its death and burial, of its eternal ending, on a slip of paper against my breast. Enough that the chains that bound me, the despair that made

me a prisoner weary of life, a man more like a heartless, silent brute than aught else, have fallen from me for ever, and that, redeemed, freed, emancipated, I come to ask of you your child.

"I would have come before, but the blow, the sudden joy, o'erthrew a frame which I, its owner, would have pledged it to withstand. I have been ill, delirious, mad, what you will, for months. Chains so heavy and so long worn could not be riven without a shock.

"But I am myself again—myself, do I say?—a thousand times better, stronger, happier than the Maurice of old, dying to pour out my love for your sweet child—my angel Maud.

"Sir Fielding, it would be false modesty were I to tell you that I knew not if I held your daughter's heart. I know—and Heaven knows how I glory in the knowledge—that she giveth me love for love. Take heed how you refuse. I will not answer for myself—I have been hardly tried, Sir Fielding—if you should say me nay."

Here his voice grew broken again, and his hand, as it rested on the table, shook visibly.

Sir Fielding drew his hand across his eyes, but could not speak.

Maurice Durant, in a lower voice, went on :

"Think me not forgetful of my respect to you—her father. There are matters which soil love's feathers if they do but light upon them. Gold turns black against a pure love ; but gold must be spoken of, so I hasten to tell you that there is enough, and more than enough, to satisfy a harder father than yourself.

"Think not," he added, with a flash of his eyes, and a gesture that actually made Sir Fielding tremble, "that I would buy my Maud. Were I poor as a saint I would ask her of you. No, Sir Fielding. Gold to those who love the dross ; for us, let us shun it."

Sir Fielding flushed.

"Another word would have wounded me," he murmured.

"Therefore I said it not," said Maurice

Durant, leaning over and grasping his hand, while he let the other fall on Chudleigh's shoulder.

"Come, Sir Fielding, give me the right to call Maud my wife and you my father!"

Sir Fielding pressed his hand, and mastering his emotion, muttered:

"Take her, Maurice Durant. Of the past, so that it be vanished, I wish to know nothing; of the future, it is in your care."

"Nay!" cried Maurice Durant, rising with a reverent look upon his face. "But in God's."

* * * * * *

"You love me, my darling?" rang out the low words as the beautiful girl nestled against his heart in the soft firelight. "You love me?"

"Could I live if I did not?" she breathed back, tenderly.

"And you do not fear me?" asked he, a slight shade flitting across his brow.

"Not more than I ought," was the reply as the loving eyes filled with tears. "I cannot but look up as the flowers raise their heads to the sun—not with pride, but with loving humility. You are my king! Speak, I obey; smile, and I love; frown, and I die; but smile or frown I love you—I love you always and for ever."

The dark eyes above her were filled with tears—the first that had shone there for many a long year.

"My darling, my rose, my gem. Heaven is too good to me."

"No, no," she murmured.

Then, pressing her to his breast, he walked slowly to the piano, and, sitting down, poured out his heart in a burst of grand music, that seemed to the gentle girl leaning on his shoulder to be born indeed of Heaven and its angelic choir.

Two or three days later the morning papers inserted a large paragraph, and in one or two

cases indulged in a leading article, on the mysterious and romantic appearance of the artist and musician whose works had for the last five years been the subject of universal admiration, and one paper more daring than its contemporaries launched out into a complete and florid sketch of the great genius's life, not a single particular of which was true, excepting those of his appearance at the ball and his being the Rector of Grassmere.

Maurice Durant when shown these articles and paragraphs laughed heartily — he would have sneered a few months ago—but Maud was inexpressibly proud of them, though not at all surprised at the *furore* which her grand lover had made, for she had always held him to be something high and noble, and it was but the fulfilment of her expectations.

Invitations flowed in thick and fast upon Maurice Durant, but he refused them one and all. Though he had entered the world again it was with no love for it. He had left his

quiet retreat to claim his prize, and was now anxious to return—not to the old life of solitude —but to Grassmere.

Accordingly in June the Chichesters, with the exception of Chudleigh, who remained in town, returned to the Hall with Maurice Durant as guest.

The joy of that first day at the old Hall who shall describe?

Maud leaning on her lover's arm felt herself inclined to weep for relief as she heard his joyous voice and grand, ringing laugh so different to the grim smile and deep, hard tones of old.

"Maurice," she said, after dinner, blushing shyly as she spoke his name, "I have a surprise for you. Will you come with me?"

"Come with you? Anywhere, my darling. Whither are you going?"

"You mustn't ask," she said, stroking his hand. "Come!"

Maurice Durant caught up his soft sombrero and took her hand.

"See," he said, "as a child I want to be led."

She, entering into his spirit, laughed softly, and took his hand.

So they passed on to the terrace and into the garden.

"A surprise in the open air, little one?" he said.

She nodded and smiled.

"No, not quite."

And then led him to a little summer house, built in the shape of an Indian temple.

Its erection had been a whim of Sir Fielding's, who had thought to use it for a study in the summer, but it had never fulfilled its purpose —the bookworm feeling himself unable to leave his beloved library.

Stopping at the little carved door, Maud took a key from her pocket and opened it.

"Walk in," she said.

And Maurice, at one stride clearing the white threshold, entered, and saw a beautiful little

apartment furnished with old-fashioned carved oak and lined with pictures and models.

In one corner stood an easel, in the other a suit of mail. On the massive antique table were placed palettes, maulsticks, and brushes, and in the centre a beautiful vase, containing fresh-cut flowers.

The painter uttered a cry of delight and clasped the beautiful plotter in his arms.

"My thoughtful darling," he cried.

"Are you pleased?" she asked, smiling up into his face.

"Pleased! I am delighted. It is a studio worthy of a prince."

"And are you not a prince?" she said.

He laughed.

"You are mine," she said, simply. "But, Maurice ——"

And she stopped.

"Speak on, *cara mia*," he said, tenderly, stroking her beautful hair. "Speak on——"

"You will—will it disturb you if sometimes

I come and peep in—come and sit sometimes, for a minute—only a minute——"

"Come always, or be assured even this pretty place will be unable to hold me long. Come and sit there in the light while I work, getting inspiration and fire from your beautiful eyes. Ah! my darling, my darling! How sweet—how beautiful thou hast made life for me! See! I feel that I could paint heaven and the angels when I look within your pure eyes, hear your sweet, loving voice."

And he held her face in his hands, and gazed down into the clear depths of her dark orbs.

"And I—ah, you can tell what you feel, my prince; but I am stupid and ignorant, and can find no words to tell of the joy and happiness that thrill through me at the touch of your dear hands—see how I love to kiss them—the sound of your beautiful voice. Oh, Maurice, Maurice, I lie awake at night and wonder if it is all a dream, if it can be possible and real that you, so great, so clever, so grandly above all

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other men, can stoop to think of—much less love—so insignificant a being as I."

His eyes grew dim, and his voice too low for her to hear, as he muttered :

"Can so sweet a flower bear the light and the winds, the sun and the rain ? Oh, Heaven, keep and temper thy mercy towards her."

Then aloud :

"My sweet Maud, 'tis well thou dost not know the story of the past! Thou wouldst think me no prince, save the prince of sinners."

"More sinned against than sinning," she replied, quickly.

"Thinkest thou so ?" he said, musing. "Ay ! ay !"

Then, with his arm round her, they strolled down to the river's bank, the birds' song suddenly fraught with a new sweet meaning, the stream-ripple thrilling with a new sense.

"Where is the boat, my darling ?" he said.

"On the other side, I think," she said. "Are you going to take me for a row ?"

He nodded, and glanced up and down for some means of reaching the other side.

"The bridge?" he asked.

"Is a mile down the stream," she replied.

"Then we must make one," he said, lightly; and, with a suddenness that made her start, he sprang at the branch of a tree which hung over the stream, and, clutching it with a grasp of iron, went along it hand over hand until he could drop on the opposite bank.

Maud stared with astonished admiration.

It was the feat of a giant, yet he seemed to do it as easily as walking across a room.

"Are you not hurt?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Hurt, my darling?" he said, laughing. "No, why should I be? Stay thou there till I bring the boat," and he strode away.

In a few moments Maud saw him standing up in the old-fashioned boat, propelling it, gondolier fashion, with a speed and grace that charmed her.

"Canst thou do everything?" she said as he

leapt to her side, using his "thou," which sounded so sweetly in her ear.

He laughed, and, sweeping the dust from the seat with his handkerchief, picked her up in his arms like a child and put her on a little dainty seat of cushions.

"Now we will go swiftly," he said as the boat darted from the shore.

"And you will sing?"

"And I will sing," he said, and with that he commenced a soft, sweet melody set to an Italian love song that chimed in with every stroke of the single oar and every movement of his strong, graceful form.

So they went down the stream, thinking earth a Paradise which their love had turned to Heaven.

Day followed day like one sweet dream another. Maurice Durant had become the idol of the place; his exploits, his daring, his genius the talk of the county and the admiration and wonder of Grassmere.

He rode as no one else could ride save an Arab or a Mexican hunter, so said the gentlemen. He painted with the brush of a Rubens or a Vandyke declared the art authorities. He shot like a fur-trapper or a rifle-ranger, said the sportsmen; and all agreed that his voice was the sweetest they had ever heard.

His manner too had a certain charm about it that no one could resist; it was tinged with command yet mellowed with a softness peculiarly his own.

Equipped with such manly and graceful attributes, it was scarcely a matter of surprise that the strange being whose past life was still a profound mystery should be sought after and made an idol of. He refused few invitations, going with Maud almost everywhere, always ready to talk in his soft, musical accents of strange sights and incidents which his own eyes had witnessed, always yielding with a gracious smile to their request that he would play and sing, leaving the drawing-room for the smoking-

room to find the men as eager to admire and applaud him as the women.

The summer was a dream of happiness to Maud. At night she scarcely slept for joy; the day seemed to fly past on the wings of love and happiness.

Sir Fielding, relieved of his load of anxiety concerning the estate, was serenely happy in his library and the knowledge of his darling's gladness, and felt that his lines had fallen in pleasant places in the twilight of his departing days.

So shines the sun and murmur the gentle breezes in the calm before a storm.

In August Lord and Lady Crownbrilliants returned to the Retreat, and Chudleigh took up his quarters at the Hall.

His appearance scarcely harmonised with the general aspect of happiness, for he was looking pale and worn, and, what was worse, restless and unhappy.

Maurice Durant, who drove Maud over to

the Retreat in a tiny little carriage drawn by a pair of pure Arabian ponies—his own gift —noticed the same expression on the beautiful face of Lady Crownbrilliants, and grew grave and silent, for his keen eyes read their secret at a glance.

CHAPTER V.

"Tempted himself, turns tempter too."—PRIOR.

"WHAT I s-say is this," stammered Lord Crownbrilliants, poising his wine-glass in mid air, and looking over at her ladyship with a stolid, would-be severe stare in his glass-framed eye. "I s-say that it's not b-becoming of the wife of Lord Cwownbwilliants to interfere with s-such things."

The countess raised her eyebrows and shot a cold, imperial glance from her dark eyes at his fair, foppish face.

"D-do you hear me?" he snapped, angered by her silence.

"I heard you," she said, simply.

"Then w-why d-don't you answer?"

"I have nothing or little to say. I obey but cannot argue."

"Vewy unlike your s-sex usually," sneered his lordship, sticking his fork into the salmon viciously.

Then, after eating in a disagreeable, peevish sort of way that was particularly unpleasant to witness, he commenced again, in a mocking, sneering tone:

"F-flower shows!—widiculous. W-what next? What on earth d-do the p-people want with flower-shows? It's all deuced n-nonsense and I won't have you mixing yourself up in it."

Still not a word—the eyes fixed upon the plate, her hands toying with the carved handle of the silver knife.

"I kn-know where you got it from—it's one of C-Chichester's c-confounded stupid notions. I—I tell you what it is, my lady, you're a deal too th-thick with——"

"My lord!" she said, at last, with flashing eyes and heaving bosom.

"D-don't shriek at me like that. I w-won't st-stand it," snapped Lord Crownbrilliants. "It's twue and you kn-know it. He's always here. I'm p-perfectly sick of seeing him. Besides, you ought to know your position better than to encourage another man who was known to have been s-sweet upon you."

The countess rose white and majestic.

"You remind me of my position, my lord; give me leave to retire, or I may forget it as you forget yours."

His lordship, delighted at the anger he had at last aroused, coolly sipped his wine and grinned.

"My p-position. I can't vewy well forget it, not having had a vewy much worse, my lady. Now you——"

But she had gone, her long silken dress rustling behind her like a snake, and his lordship with a cunning grin refilled his glass.

"Pwoud as she is I'll bwing her under yet. As for C-Chichester, I'll stop his little game with a s-snap of my fingers."

Two hours later Carlotta saw, from her dim corner at the window of her own room, the stalwart figure of Chudleigh Chichester cantering his favourite mare up the carriage drive.

Her heart beat thick and fast as she rose trembling.

If they met, with her husband in his present mood, what might not be the consequences?

She knew the weak, aggravating, childish peevishness of the man who owned her, and she knew also the quick, hot temper of the man who loved her, heated and strained to its extreme tension by that very love.

Ringing the bell with a quivering hand, she bade her maid show Mr. Chichester into the drawing-room, and hastily bathing her tear-swollen eyes, stole down the stairs.

The smile that always lighted up Chudleigh's face sprang to his eyes as she entered and held out her hand, but it gave place to a heavy frown as he murmured:

"Crying again? No denial, Carlotta; you

cannot hide it. You forget I know every expression of your face as a priest knows his missal. What has happened? Has he——"

"Oh, Chudleigh, Chudleigh," she breathed, "let go my hand. You—you must not come here again—you must not. See—oh, do not look so! Oh, Chudleigh, God forgive me—but—I love you so."

And the unhappy woman hid her face in her hands.

"God forgive you, my darling!" he murmured. "How have you sinned, save in giving yourself to this—this—man? And heaven has forgiven you that long since. Oh, Carlotta, if—if——"

"Hush! What was that?" she cried, starting and clutching his arm as a crash came from the dining-room.

"Is he there?" asked Chudleigh, in a whisper.

She nodded.

"Let us go to him—he may come here, and ——"

Chudleigh opened the door and followed her into the hall.

Entering the dining-room, they saw that his lordship had fallen asleep across the table, having knocked down and broken a couple of glasses in his descent.

Carlotta shuddered, and Chudleigh's face grew awful in its contempt.

It was too fearful, this looking helplessly on at the spectacle of the man who had married the woman he loved lying drunk across the dinner-table.

"Come away," he whispered, turning to the door with Carlotta on his arm.

Bnt the rustle of her dress awoke his lordship, who started to his feet, and, with bloodshot eyes, stared drunkenly at Chudleigh.

"Hullo, C-Chichester," he hiccupped, "you're here again, hic, are you? I thought I told you," swerving round with half-closed eyes to the shrinking Carlotta. "I thought I, hic, told you that I w-wouldn't have my f-fine gentleman

here again, eh? Then what the deuce—I say what the d-deuce does he do here? I'm the master in my own house, I'm your h-husband, I'm——"

Rambling away into a string of incoherencies, he fell into the chair again, sweeping a fresh lot of glass from the table with his helpless arm.

Chudleigh strode to the bell, his face white and his teeth clenched.

"Tell his lordship's valet to come here at once," he said to the servant, and closing the door upon the drunken man, he led the trembling Carlotta to the drawing-room. Then, as she sank upon a couch, he fell on his knees beside her and seizing her hand said, in a hurried, tremulous whisper:

"My darling! Carlotta, I canot—you cannot bear it longer. It would be cruel, it would be wicked to leave you in his power. Carlotta, we must fly—fly to some distant land! Oh, my darling, do not hesitate. To-morrow night I will have a post-chaise at the end of the lane; we

will start from the Warrington Station and reach Paris in a few hours. From Paris we will go to Italy—Italy!—think, my darling! Oh, Carlotta, say yes. Stay! do not speak, place your hand in mine. Ah, you will come away from all this suffering, darling. Leave all to me. Leave all to me, my own, my own!"

CHAPTER VI.

"Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown."

"Such an act makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oaths."

"So let him rest; his faults lie gently on him."

SHAKSPEARE.

THE following morning Maurice Durant, on his way to the Rectory, which an army of workmen was making habitable, met Chudleigh riding at full gallop in the direction of the Hall, looking flurried and heated.

He pulled up as he saw Maurice, and said:

"Going to the Rectory?"

"Yes. And you?" answered Maurice Durant, fixing him with his keen dark eyes.

"To the Hall," replied Chudleigh. "I have

just come from Warrington, where I heard news that will necessitate my immediate return to town."

As he said it his eyes dropped before Maurice's searching ones, and the keen observer, used to reading men's faces at a glance, saw that something was wrong.

"Indeed!" he said. "Some of your politics going wrong? Your party in danger?"

"N-no—that is, yes," said Chudleigh, with some little confusion.

Maurice walked up to the mare, and, patting it with his strong white hand, said significantly, looking straight up into the younger man's downcast eyes:

"Be careful, my friend; take the advice of one who has suffered severely from his own errors, and shun the first one."

Chudleigh started, but could not meet the earnest eyes.

"Eh, what?" he said, brokenly. "Oh, yes —yes—yes. I must be going—till we meet

again," and started off at a sharp trot, which, before the silent, motionless figure looking at him had lost sight of him, had passed into the old break-neck gallop.

Sir Fielding asked no embarrassing questions when informed that Chudleigh must proceed to town at once, and gave him the sum of money he wanted without a moment's hesitation, so that Chudleigh found everything clear and easy, and felt perfectly secure against detection and pursuit as he walked into the stables and told his groom to harness the best pair to a light brougham at ten o'clock; but as a farther precaution beckoned the man aside and told him, with a significant look, that he need not mention the orders he had received.

"Very good, sir," replied the intelligent servitor, "what time did you say, sir?"

"Ten o'clock. In time to catch the half-past ten from Warrington. And, by the way, George, you may as well drive, it is rather late for old William, and—you understand?"

"Quite so," replied the groom, touching his hat. "You'll find me all right, sir; where shall I take 'em?"

"To the end of the Park. I will tell you where to drive when I see you."

* * * * *

The day taken up with preparation for the flight, passed with tolerable speed to Chudleigh; to the woman who was about to resign herself and her position to his hands the hours lagged fearfully.

All night long Right and Wrong had been battling within her. One hour she had determined to take the fearful step and fly with the man she loved better than the whole world and her own soul, the next her better feelings got the upper hand, and, melted into tears and racked with sobs, she resolved to stay with the man she hated with a hatred that grew each day.

In the morning she arose white and wearied, and found his lordship seated in the break-

fast-room, looking as yellow as a guinea, with black marks under his eyes, and hands that shook the paper they clenched nervelessly.

Without a word she sat down at the table and poured out some coffee, without a word he stretched forward and took a cup, upsetting some of its contents over the magnificent carpet.

"Why do you f-fill the c-cup so full?" he snapped. "And what made you s-so late?"

"I was tired," she said, in tones of ice.

"T-tired!" he said, with a sneer. "W-what with? N-not hard work. W-what the d-deuce should make you tired?"

She turned her face so that it came within the shadow of the curtain, and made no answer.

Presently his lordship uttered an oath, and dropped the paper on the ground.

"N-nowhere!" he stammered, his face crimson and his fingers twitching. "Redcap nowhere. Why, she was pwime f-favourite yesterday. Nowhere. Phew! There's t-two thousand

g-guineas gone! But what do you c-care?" he snapped, turning with a jerk to the silent, beautiful figure. "You don't care whether I win or lose. Y-you're a pretty wife, y-you are! Why don't you answer me?"

"I have nothing to say," replied Carlotta, with simple scorn. "Besides, your lordship forgets that you have not asked me a question."

"Asked you a q-question! Of course I haven't; but I s-suppose you don't mean to keep s-silence until I do!"

Carlotta made no reply. And stung by the scorn of her dark eyes the weak-brained, malicious idiot caught up the paper and flung it full in her regal face.

She sprang to her feet at the outrage, and for the moment he thought she was about to strike him; but, instead, she stooped, and picking up the paper calmly placed it on the table, saying, with a strange smile:

"Did I not know that this was the last insult

your lordship would offer me, I could not bear it."

"Oh, you've s-spoken at l-last, have you?" he sneered. "I th-thought that would move you. And now I don't know what you mean, and I d-don't care."

And rising from the chair he walked to the window and called to a man to get a dog-cart ready.

"The cob, your lordship?" asked the man, touching his cap respectfully.

"Of c-course, idiot," returned his lordship, savagely, "and get weady to come with me to the steeplechase at Brockton. I shall s-start in an hour."

And with a scowl at his wife he lounged out.

Carlotta drank a cup of coffee, and then returned to her room.

Her face was calm and set, her mind determined. The last insult had been the one which had broken the back of her patience.

Locking the door, she leisurely packed a small

portmanteau with the clothes she had owned at her marriage, unlocked her jewel cases, and took from them the few trinkets that she had worn in her maidenhood, and those that had been presents to her from Lady Mildred, and all others excepting her husband's.

His gifts and the Crownbrilliants diamonds she set aside in their cases, and placing them on her dressing-table, laid this note, together with the keys, on the top.

"LORD CROWNBRILLIANTS,

"Before you have read this I shall have left you for ever, and be miles away from the misery your presence inflicts. Heaven knows when I married you, I intended being a faithful and, if possible, a loving wife. I have striven to carry out my resolution. But you would not have it so. Your temporary passion, I might more truthfully say your whim, your fancy, soon vanished, and you soon proved by your conduct, your words, nay your very looks, that you

had grown to hate and despise me. From your hate, contempt, and insult, I have been compelled to fly. May Heaven lay the sin, if sin it be, to your charge, not to mine, who am driven to it by your cruelty.

"CARLOTTA.

"You will see that with the name you gave me on our marriage day I have left every article which I, as your wife, possessed. One favour I have to ask, and being the last my lips or pen will ever beg of you, I have some hopes of your granting it; it is that you will not attempt to follow me. Pursuit is useless. I would rather die than see your face again."

Having written this, she, woman-like, burst into tears. But her proud spirit was too wounded to draw back, and with a trembling hand she folded the paper, placed it in an envelope, and directing it "Lord Crownbrilliants," she laid it on the top of the jewel case, then throwing herself upon the bed, she tried to sleep, for she knew that

when the night came she would require all the strength of mind and body she could command.

Seven o'clock came, and dinner was announced. Hastily dressing to prevent any suspicion, she glided downstairs, and found that Lord Crownbrilliants had not returned.

She waited half-an-hour then went through the pretence of partaking of the costly viands laid out for her, and feeling ready to choke at every mouthful, swallowed some soup and ate the wing of a chicken.

Before she finished a footman entered and handed her a note on a silver salver.

The address was in Chudleigh's handwriting, and with palpitating heart, though with a calm face, she slowly tore the envelope open.

The note ran thus:

"My Darling,—"All is going well. At ten meet me at the bottom of the rose garden, and leave all the rest in my hands. Be firm.

"Ever your own

Chudleigh."

With trembling fingers she put the note in her pocket, and sipped a little wine, then telling her maid that she did not wish to be disturbed, stole up to her room again.

Once more the battle within her breast commenced, but a glance at the beloved name at the foot of the note weighed down the balance of evil, and nerving herself to the task, she slowly removed the magnificent evening dress, and put on some dark travelling clothes.

Then she sat down in the shadow of the room to wait with tightly clasped hands the striking of the hours.

Eight! nine! ten!

She arose, and striving to still the tumultuous beating of her heart by pressing her white hand against her side, opened the door, and stole on to the corridor.

At the foot of the stairs she met her maid, who stared at the dark clothes, and stood respectfully aside.

"I am going to walk in the garden, Parker,"

she said. "I may go as far as the town, tell his lordship when he returns."

"Very good, my lady," said the woman and the trembling lady glided on.

Once in the garden she breathed a sigh of relief. Not a soul was in sight. She saw the smoke from the gardener's cottage in the distance; saw the light in the bedrooms of the house behind, heard the barking of a dog in the stables, with a dead, dreamy feeling of unreality, and still glided on.

The rose garden! She stopped, and clenching her teeth, stood for a moment white and death-like. Before she recovered herself a man's form leapt from the shadow, clasped her in his arms, and Chudleigh's voice whispered, passionately:

"My darling, I knew you would come. Be calm, be brave! All is ready."

She did not speak, but her eyes met his in a stupor of agony, and he with a groan, caught her up in his arms and carried her to the carriage waiting behind the hedge.

Placing the cushions for her tenderly, he whispered to the groom on the box :

" To the station like lightning," and, jumping in, closed the door.

She spoke not a word, only clung, white and trembling, to his arm.

The horses dashed on—the carriage rocked to fro in the country lanes.

A quarter of an hour passed.

Chudleigh drew one hand from the waist of the woman he loved, and was stealing a glance at his watch. As he did so the carriage came to a sudden halt, the horses' hoofs could be heard as they reared and struck the ground, and a voice cried from the darkness :

" Stop !"

The groom uttered an imprecation, and Chudleigh sprang up, threw open the door, and leaped into the road.

As he did so a horseman rode up to his side, and Maurice Durant's voice said, with startling calmness :

"Another moment and I should have been too late!" Then in a lower tone, perfectly inaudible to the trembling Carlotta within the carriage as the speaker bent down:

"Chudleigh, come farther away. I have news sudden and terrible."

Chudleigh, too startled to do anything but obey, followed the horseman to the farther hedge.

"Now—now," he cried, hoarsely. "Quick; you don't know——" with a glance towards the carriage.

"Yes, I do," returned the other, "and I thank my Creator, and yours, Chudleigh Chichester, that I am in time to stay you. A terrible accident has happened. A horse has run away, a cart been overturned, shattered to pieces; the victim is now being carried up this very lane."

"Accident—cart overturned—victim!" repeated Chudleigh, pressing his hand to his forehead, then exclaiming, passionately: "Well, sir,

and what has this to do with me and you? Heavens! you have nearly made me lose this train! Stand aside—I am on business of the utmost importance—I—stand aside, sir, I say!"

Maurice Durant's heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Do you not understand?" he said, in low, ringing tones.

"Turn the carriage and drive back like death, or you are lost. The crowd are bringing the dead man up the lane—will be here in another minute!"

"Dead man!" repeated Chudleigh.

"Who?"

"Clarence, Lord Crownbrilliants!" replied Maurice Durant, sternly.

Chudleigh uttered a low cry, and staggered.

"He!" he cried.

"Yes—dead!" returned the other, curtly. "Now, quick, or you are lost."

Chudleigh leapt into the carriage.

The groom, at a word from Maurice Durant, turned the plunging horses round, and away they dashed towards Annsleigh again.

Carlotta, lying faint and deathlike against the cushions, clung to him, and, gasping, implored him again and again to tell her what had happened.

He could not speak, but hid her face against his breast.

The carriage stopped at the garden gate.

As if in a dream, Chudleigh lifted the beauliful woman out, and, taking her up in his arms, staggered up the rosary.

"Fly to your room," he whispered, hoarsely, as they entered the hall. "Fly!"

She stood still for a moment, her dark eyes fixed upon him intently and wonderingly, then walked obediently to the stairs. Before her foot had touched the first one, the dull roar of a crowd, and the sound of many heavy footsteps were heard outside, and a

loud ringing of the bells rang through the house.

A servant hurried to open the hall-door, and half-a-dozen men, followed by a number of others, entered, bearing something long and limp, covered by a cloak.

Carlotta turned round and stared.

Chudleigh sprang before her.

The foremost man took off his cap and stood irresolute.

At that moment a horseman leapt from his horse, and, pushing aside the crowd, flung open the drawing-room door.

"In there!" he said, in a low voice.

Not too low for Carlotta to hear, however, for, suddenly recalled to a consciousness of what was going on around her, she gently pushed Chudleigh aside, and glided through the door after the four men.

They tried to hold her back, but she put them aside with a calm, strong hand, and, advancing to the still burden, lifted the long

cloak; then, gazing for a moment on the set, livid face that never more would sneer and mock her, she threw up her arms, and crying, "Dead!" fell, senseless, into Chudleigh's arms.

CHAPTER VII.

"You could do all things but be good
Or chaste of mien,
And that you would not if you could,
We know, Faustine."—SWINBURNE.

BRIGHT December. That is, bright in the country, with the trees and the meadows clothed in spotless robes of glittering snow, and the streams turned to still threads of silver; but dull, grim, and doleful in town, with the pavements and roads sloppy with the slush that penetrates the thickest boots, and makes the best-tempered man morose.

Particularly dull, grim, and dirty in the region of Hatton Garden, where the filthy gutters are reeking with half-melted snow and accumulated drainage; the houses grimmer in the bitter

winter time, when the stark wolf Hunger is fiercer and more insatiable.

Most particularly grim and miserable in the bar of the dirty, low-browed public-house at the bottom of the dark alley, for the sawdust grates beneath the cold, uncertain tread like snow-drift, and the counter feels cold and clammy when your fingers touch it.

Seated in the little parlour, through which, about two summers ago, the four men had passed to the underground kitchen to plot the attack on the Rectory, sat a man and a woman.

The man was Spazzola, sitting huddled up over the scrap of miserable fire, scratching his rags closer to him with a gesture that was eloquent of the Italian hatred for cold.

The woman we have not seen before, though we have heard of her.

Tall and well-formed, she might have been—nay, she *was*—beautiful in her youth. But time and the vilest dissipation had thinned her straggling black hair, drink had blurred

her dark eyes and drawn black hollows beneath them, and coarse rouge had left its tell-tale yellow upon her wasted cheek.

But there was still a look of savage cunning in her large, dull eyes, and a determined, passionate expression in her coarse, animal mouth.

Looking at her as she leaned over the beer-stained rickety table, her dirty hands, covered with mock jewellery of the loudest description, clasped in front of her, no one would have guessed that she had once been the beauty and the toast of Paris, and the *belle* of half the civilised cities in the world; now she was—well, what she was—the shadow of a grand figure, the wreck of a magnificent face.

Listen, it is she who speaks.

"How long, miserable object, art thou going to sit cowering over that fire, like a lost soul in purgatory?" she asked, with a low, discordant laugh.

"As long as I will," returned Spazzola,

with a snarl. "Purgatory! wouldst thou wert there!"

"Not so," retorted the woman. "For then must I be where thou art eternally, and that would be purgatory ten thousand times heated."

Spazzola snarled.

"Enough, spare thy tongue its venom. Dost think to touch one already deadened to thy sting? Thou askest me how long I think of staying here. I tell thee till thou art tired waiting for me to go. Felise! what dost thou want? What dost thou expect? What hast thou been dogging me for? Thou shouldst know by this time that I have never a bone to spare."

"And if thou hadst I never should get it," she said, with a bitter laugh. "No, Spazzola mine, 'tis not for bones, 'tis for meat I follow."

"Meat!" he sneered, turning to the fire again and shutting it from her by his ragged cloak. "Meat! Ugh!"

"Ay, meat!" she repeated. "Spazzola, thou

art a dullard; thou art like the lizard who thought to escape the hunter's eye by shamming death. Ah! ah! I know thee; I know thee. Too long hast thou had the chase to thyself; too long hast gorged the plunder, while I have starved in the cold.

"Plunder! Gorged!" he snarled, rising with a contemptuous shrug of his lean shoulders. "Felise, thou art a bigger idiot than I thought thee. Look at me; look at me, I ask thee. Do I look like a pampered, well-filled dog, or a lean, half-starved hound? Gorged!" he cried with a savage laugh. "There!" flinging a few coppers upon the table, which the woman pounced on and transferred to her pocket. "There is all my wealth, and thou hast it. Therefore, if it be that which draws thee after me step by step the magnet's gone, and——"

"It is not," she laughed, sardonically. "'Tis well done, Spazzola. I see thou hast lost none of thy craft. Thou art the same fair-faced

hypocrite as in the old days when—— Shah! Spazzola mine; they are as unsavoury to me as thee. But thou art the same, unaltered—save for being uglier—like myself," she added, quickly and carelessly, as he turned with a significant grin. "Quite the same cheating fox!"

He sprang to his feet at the scornful words, but she, nothing daunted, laughed tauntingly, and struck her glass on the table.

"Empty—like thyself, my Spazzola—all air, empty air, and no liquor. Come, we will fill both of them at thy expense, and then to business."

"Business!" he snarled, sinking into his seat as at the answer to her summons a dirty-looking girl entered, and filled the glasses from a long-necked Rhine flagon.

"Ay, business," she repeated. "Thou saidst I had watched; dost think I watch for nothing? Shah! Thou art not so great an idiot. I have watched and seen; thou hast some game on

hand; thou hold'st winning cards. Soh! I will see the cards, and wait also. I will! And when I say I will it is useless for thee to say 'thou wilt not'—that thou knowest. Come, leave the fire, and bare that honest breast of thine that I may see the secret there. Come! show the cards."

"I have none to show," he snarled, cowering still closer to the fire.

Her eyes flashed for a moment, and the soiled fingers tightened round the thick stem of the glass.

"Idiot!" she hissed, leaning over the table till her wine-stained breath came hotly against his hair. "Idiot! Wilt thou leave me to find it out and take my own and thy share too? Idiot! Am I blind, thinkest thou, or as great a dolt as thyself that thou hug'st thyself with the belief that I do not know that thou hast found him!"

"'Tis false!" he hissed, turning so sharply round that his blazing eyes met hers point blank.

"Tis true!" she hissed, in return, her clenched hand trembling with passion. "You have found him."

"And if I have?" he snarled, rising and striking the table with his clenched hand. "What is that to thee? Get thee back to thy den in Paris, in Venice, anywhere but here. Thou shalt not touch the game. I have sworn it."

She tossed down the wine, and leered up at him.

His passion grew in intensity beneath her mocking gaze, until the veins stood out black and cord-like upon his swarthy forehead.

"Soh!" she hissed, in a soft, snake-like tone.

"Felise is to be robbed twice of that which is hers by right! Spazzola is to snare the game marked with her brand long since, and she is not to touch, not to lay so much as a finger on it. She is to be the catspaw for the monkey, Spazzola! Shah! Idiot, ten thousand times

idiot! I tell you I have found him already——"

He sprang forward and grasped her arm, his face working like a demon's, his breath coming in thick, quick gasps.

"I have him as surely as thou. Shall I tell thee where the game lies——"

Here she dropped her voice and whispered a word.

He started, and stood with folded arms and averted, flashing eyes.

Five minutes passed, the woman looking up at him with a low look of triumphant cunning, then, with a scornful voice she said:

"Well, is it to be war or peace? Do we work together, my Spazzola, or separately?"

He sank into the chair, and fixed his black eyes upon her searchingly.

"Thou wilt not play me false, he said?" in a low voice.

"I follow thee," she said, with a significant look.

He held out his hand.

"Good. Thou wilt leave everything to me and take thy fair half?"

"Thou shalt earn it all, and I will be satisfied with half, Spazzola mine," she grinned, grasping his hand.

"Good," he said, knocking the table. "Now to seal the bond. More wine!"

A bottle was brought, the woman snatched at it eagerly, and filled her glass—drained it, and filled it, drained it, filled again, and again, and again—her companion seemingly drinking as hard, though really careful never to fill his glass, but talking and pushing the bottle continually.

Presently the woman's voice grew thicker, huskier, until it was unintelligible; then, when the bottle was nearly emptied, the glass dropped from her hand, her head fell upon her arms, and she fell into sleep.

Spazzola sprang to his feet like a cat, and leaning across the table he drew a long shining stiletto from beneath his cape.

It flashed in the air for one second, then dropped at his side as he hissed :

"Not yet! Not yet!"

Had that foot of steel been buried in the neck of the sleeping woman how much anxiety would have been spared Maurice Durant!

CHAPTER VIII.

"Where, when the gods would be cruel,
Do they go for a torture? where
Plant thorns, set pain as a jewel?
Ah! not in the flesh, not there!
The racks of earth and the rods
Are weak as foam on the sands;
In the heart is the prey for gods,
Who crucify hearts, not hands."

SWINBURNE.

LADY CROWNBRILLIANTS sat in her luxurious easy-chair in the crimson drawing-room of the Retreat.

The bright fire burning in the polished stove lit up her lovely face, and the handsome one of Chudleigh Chichester beside her, with a rich red glow,—only wanting to make her sweet, pale countenance perfect.

"Well, Carlotta," he said, rather impatiently,

toying with her white hand, on which the wedding ring was surmounted by a deep mourning one set in brilliants. "Well," he repeated, "what's the answer? Yes or no? Let it be yes, my darling."

She plucked and plucked the crape of her dress nervelessly.

"It is so soon yet——"

"Soon! It seems an age to me," he replied. "Think how long I have waited—how patiently! Ah, Carlotta, if you knew how I thirsted to call you mine—mine—my own—you would not put me off. I can do nothing, think of nothing, while you are still buried here in this hateful place."

"Hateful place!" she repeated.

"Ay, hateful, for was it not his?"

She bowed her head in her hands.

"How soon did you say?" she said, faintly.

"A month," he repeated, "March. Even that seems a long time for me to wait. March. Come, Carlotta, say yes, that I may go up to

town, glad and light of heart, to make the preparations. Ah, my darling, my poor darling, if you knew how my life is buried in you, how I lay my ambition, my hopes, my future at your feet, you would not hesitate!"

"I—I do not," she replied. "March! Only another month!" she repeated gazing into the fire.

"Yes," he repeated, "only another month," his eager hand caressing hers, his eyes fastened on her face. "Say yes."

"Yes," she answered, obediently, turning her lovely eyes to his, and laying her glorious head upon his breast.

* * * *

Of course the county was somewhat shocked —or professed to be—it always does. Lord Crownbrilliants was scarcely cold they averred, and quoted with upraised eyes the lines from Hamlet about the funeral baked meats setting forth the marriage feast.

But Chudleigh cared not for the county, and

Sir Fielding, who did not study it very much, decided to have a grand wedding, and give a ball in the evening at the Hall.

The county having a weakness for grand weddings and balls, immediately veered round, and praised the match and the bridegroom elect as much as they had before condemned.

The day drew near; preparations had been made on an extensive scale, and the Hall was a gorgeous interior of crimson velvet, choice flowers, and festive decorations.

The little church had been festooned with hothouse flowers by Maud; and Maurice Durant had offered to officiate.

This was the most enticing line of the programme, for the Rector of Grassmere had become a popular man, and everybody was eager to see and to hear him, all the more so that the story of his past unknown sorrow had spread far and wide.

Lady Crownbrilliants had fixed upon Florence as the place at which to spend the honeymoon,

and Chudleigh had sent a courier out to hire a pretty villa.

Sir Fielding, who was delighted at the match, and the happy glow that had suddenly sprang to Chudleigh's face, purchased a magnificent set of pearls as a wedding present, and Maud had procured a pretty bracelet of emeralds and brilliants.

Maurice Durant contributed a tiara fit for a princess, and the other bridal gifts were little less magnificent.

Altogether it promised to be a grand wedding, and when the sun rose with summer brightness on the morning, the invited guests did not forget to quote the old adage, "Happy is the bride," &c., as they thronged to the little church, in all the majesty of light-coloured silks and satins.

The church was full, every seat occupied, the aisle lined with titled ladies and well-dressed gentlemen.

The organ, played by an organist Maurice

Durant had procured from London, rolled out grand hymns of praise, as Chudleigh Chichester appeared and walked to the altar to wait for his bride.

A happy flush was on his brow, and a bright, joyous light in his eyes, and several—who had witnessed the wedding of two years back—whispered to each other how differently the bridegroom looked; and as Carlotta appeared, followed by the beauteous Maud and the other bridesmaids, how differently the bride!

Then Maurice Durant commenced the service, his grand, ringing voice repeating the old, old, familiar words with a music in it that lent it a new and solemn meaning.

In a perfectly audible voice Chudleigh made the responses, Carlotta in softer tones; a hymn was sung, the organ pealed out afresh, and the wedding was over.

There was a crowd outside the church, and both bride and bridegroom as they entered their carriage were lustily cheered; as were

also the company and Sir Fielding—who looked ten years younger, so an old tenant said—in his old-fashioned blue coat and diamond adorned ruffles.

There was a magnificent breakfast at the Hall, the usual speeches—a good one from Chudleigh, the usual commonplace yet not unwelcome ones of the old people, who always will speak at wedding breakfasts,—a tearful, quiet one from Sir Fielding, and then the happy couple departed followed by Sir Fielding and Maud's blessings, and a shower of white slippers.

Then the guests strolled about the grounds, played billiards, gathered around Maurice Durant at the great organ in the gallery, and otherwise amused themselves until six, when a dinner—as magnificent as the breakfast—was laid out in the banqueting-hall.

After dinner—it was March, and the doors shut—preparations were made for the ball, more guests arrived, the hum of tongues, unloosed by

expectation, filled the old place, and the ladies were in their glory.

At eight o'clock the band struck up the first quadrille, and the ball commenced.

Maurice Durant, who of course did not dance, now stole a quiet minute or two with Maud, and seated by her side in the conservatory listened to the strains of the music, and reminded her that it was at a ball he had first called her his own.

While she with a smile clung to his great, strong arm, and was happy in his happiness.

Later on, when a break occurred, Sir Fielding sought him out and begged him to play, and he went and enthralled every soul present with a burst of joyous music that was but the outpouring of his own glad heart.

So the ball went on, merry laughter ringing through the old Hall, joyous music floating through the stained windows,—shutting out the storm which was raging over the moor and through the trees.

While Maurice Durant's voice was ringing through the church in the marriage service, the landlord of the little hostel at which years ago he had left the mastiff Tigris, was sitting at his door very much as he had sat when Maurice Durant had found him on his return.

He had heard of the wedding, and was wondering whether he really could distinguish the Grassmere bells, or if it was only his fancy deceiving him, when a woman soiled with the dust and blown by the March winds, came in sight, and walking up to him sat herself down on the bench at his side.

"Good-day, madam" said Gregory.

She gave him a good-day in answer, and asked for a glass of beer.

The landlord asked her to walk in, but in a dull, tired sort of way she shook her head, and leant back wearily against the seat.

Gregory brought the ale, and setting it down in front of her, returned to his seat, thinking that he had heard the voice before, and, watch-

ing her as she emptied the glass, wondered where.

But suddenly as she looked up and told him to fill it again, it flashed across him that the foreign tones of her voice were like those of the man from whom he every three months received a certain sum of money, and, astonished at the resemblance, he got up, and after filling the glass observed, "that it was a fine day for such an early month."

"Fine enough," replied the woman, curtly, and then, drinking the liquor, relapsed into her old attitude.

Presently the clock struck the hour, and, turning her dust-stained face to the window, she rose and asked how far it was to Grassmere.

"Sixteen miles by the road," replied the landlord.

"A long way," said the woman, with a strong foreign accent.

"It be a good pull," he assented. "Were you athinking of going that way?"

She nodded, "Yes."

Gregory looked at her old dust-stained boots and then at her weary face.

"If so be as you're not in a particular hurry," he said, slowly, "I've got a cart agoing to the 'Fox and Grapes,' just outside the village. I'd be glad to give you a lift if you'd accept of it."

She looked at him "stupid-like,' as he afterwards expressed it, and asked him when it started.

"Well, it ain't going till the morning," he replied. "But that don't matter. The missus will find you a bed and bit o' sup, and you can take a rest awhile."

She shook her head and said:

"No, no; I must be there to-night. Sixteen miles, say you?"

"A full sixteen miles," replied the man, "and uphill."

She walked into the road and looked up it, then came back.

"There's a wedding—a marriage there to-day, is there not? I heard some people talking——"

"I should think there be," said Gregory, scratching his head.

"A grand one?" she said, her face lighting up with a strange smile, and her thin, dusty hands pulling her shawl tightly around her.

"A rare grand one," replied the man. "If you're determined to go on to-night maybe you'll see the end o' the ball. There's fine doings up at the Hall—fine doings. Why, the whole county's been a-talkin' of it for the last month past."

She nodded quickly once or twice, then, putting down upon the table the price of the beer she had drunk, without a word walked away.

After a few steps she stopped and came back.

"Are there any wine-shops on the way?—what do you call them—public-houses, inns?"

"Ah—ay, there's a few," replied Gregory. "There's the 'Grape and Nettles' near upon a mile ahead, the 'Seven Stars,' and the 'Chichester Head' at the brow of the hill."

The woman nodded with the same quick, foreign gesture as before, and walked on. This time she did not return.

Later on in the evening when the storm had commenced, the landlord, who had betaken himself to his parlour fireside, and sat wondering whether his strange customer had reached some sort of shelter from the pitiless rain and the furious wind, there came a knocking at the door, and a man's voice was heard shouting for admittance.

Gregory started to his feet.

"Who can that be?" he said. "A stranger, or he'd know how to lift the latch. Sit ye still, wife, and let me go."

Opening the door he saw a tall, dark-looking man, pressed close up against the porch in a vain attempt to screen himself from the blast.

Directly the door was opened far enough he slipped in, and, turning fiercely upon the landlord, exclaimed:

"Wert asleep, dog, that thou didst not hear me knock? Are all your customers left to be blown to perdition in your doorway? 'Tis courteous and hostly."

Gregory started, and was speechless.

This man's voice was the same as the woman's who had just left.

"Ah! deaf, dumb, blind, idiot!" snarled the man, throwing off his large cloak and striding into the parlour, but pulling off his soft-brimmed hat with a surly sort of politeness to the landlady by the fire.

"Good-evening, mistress, if you can call such fiendish weather good. It is the devil's own, I think. Your husband seems deaf or dumb. Can you give me some wine?"

Gregory, still speechless, reached down a bottle and placed it with a wine-glass on the table.

The traveller flung himself into a chair, and throwing his cloak on the ground before the fire, filled his glass and emptied it.

The landlord, now somewhat recovered from his astonishment, said meekly, that it was a wet night.

The traveller did not seem to hear him, but sat staring moodily at the fire, and every now and then filling his glass—which he always emptied at a single gulp.

Presently, with a suddenness that made the pair jump, he strode to the window, and forcing it open gazed out upon the rain.

Then he turned and asked how far it was to Grassmere.

Again the landlord started and lost his tongue, but fearing another outbreak on the part of the traveller, his wife replied :

"Sixteen miles."

The man started.

"Sixteen miles!" he repeated. "The saints!" Then walked quickly to the table, emptied the

bottle, picked up his coat, threw down a coin, and walked to the door.

Suddenly he stopped, and entered the room again.

"Are there any drinking-shops on this hateful road?"

The colour forsook the landlord's face.

"Y-e-es," he managed to jerk out, and then stopped.

The traveller scowled fiercely and strode out of the bar, swinging the door behind him with a loud crash.

* * * * *

The ball was at its height, the guests heated, and flushed with pleasure, were dancing in the ball-room or sauntering through the gallery and conservatories.

A waltz was just finished and the refreshment corner of the room was crowded.

Maud had just been dancing with a younger son of Lord Housdon, and was listening to his

rather round-about description of the "best run of the season," when Maurice Durant came up with a lady on his arm, for whom he had been procuring some refreshment.

The four sat down together in a cool corner, and Maurice seizing the opportunity, managed to smuggle Maud off into the picture gallery.

"Well, *cara mia*," he said, tenderly, drawing her towards him, "are you not tired?"

"No," she said, "women never get tired of two things you know."

"What are they?" he asked, with a smile.

"Love and dancing," she replied, with a blush. "But you must be very weary," she said, looking up into his face. "You have not danced at all; but you have been working so hard to make every one happy.

"Weary!" he said—"not one whit. Had any one told me a year ago, birdie, that I could have worn the cap and bells and donned motley with so good a grace, I should have laughed them to scorn."

"That is past now," whispered Maud, caressing his hand.

"Ay, thank God," he said, throwing back his head. "Past! Little one, some day in the future, when the vanished years have grown dim and indistinct, I will tear away the veil and let you see how grim and black that past has been!"

"Why should you?" she murmured. "I can trust—nay, I do; to hear of your sorrow and suffering would pain me, and pain you, too, in the telling. Let it go by—let the veil fall thicker and thicker every year until it blots it out altogether."

"My angel," he murmured, pressing her closer to him.

"Where's Chudleigh now?" she said, presently.

"Far on the road to happiness," he answered, with a low laugh. "Poor fellow—he waited long and,"—patiently, he was going to add, but stopped, and said instead, "Maudie, mine,

how soon will you make me happy, as her ladyship has done your Chud?"

She blushed, and stole closer, till her face was hidden against his breast.

"In the summer, little one?" he went on, his voice dropping to a soft, sweet murmur, and using the words "thee and thine" unconsciously. "Early in the summer, my darling? when the blossoms are thick and the flowers lift their heads toward the sun. Tell me, Maud, wilt thou give thyself to me?—give thyself to warm and colour my life? Wilt thou come to turn the old gray, desolate Rectory, to a love cottage, shining in it and on me as the sun shines in the wilderness and in the woods? Tell me, little one, that when the birds sing again I may take thee, the sweetest of them all, to my heart to rest for evermore."

At that moment the band commenced the next dance, and Maud started.

"I am engaged for this," she said, rather

sorrowfully. "I wonder whether my partner will find me," she added, hoping that he would not.

But her wishes were disappointed, for at that moment he entered the gallery in search of her, and carried her off.

Maurice Durant, left alone, strolled to one of the windows, and unfastening it, looked out upon the night.

It was as dark as pitch, and the swift blast dashed the rain in his face.

"Storm without, peace within," he murmured, with a happy sigh. Heaven pity the traveller to-night," he added, thoughtfully, turning from the window.

As he stepped into the light a footman, who had been looking up and down the gallery, came to him quickly, and said :

"You are wanted, sir, in the hall."

"I?" said Maurice Durant, tapping his breast with astonishment.

"Yes, sir ; the person asked for you."

"Are you sure?" said Maurice Durant, wondering whom it could be.

"Certain, sir."

Maurice Durant, humming lightly, strode down the broad stairs, and entered the hall.

No one was there.

He was about to call to the footman, when a dark shadow in the corner made him almost start, and he advanced.

As he approached it turned into a woman, with its face full up against the light.

Maurice Durant looked for an instant with a dead, stony gaze, then sprang forward with a fearful suppressed cry, and, clutching its wet arm, round which the drenched shawl clung limply, gazed down with clenched teeth at the bloated, dissipated face, then threw up his arms and reeled against the wall.

For a minute the woman, who was half dead with drink and fatigue, stared at him with senseless, idiotic gaze, then rolled forward and touched his arm.

He started as if a serpent had stung him, looked round the hall with a fierce, startled gaze, then, bending forward, stole to the door, opened it, and beckoned to the woman, breathing :

"One word, and I strangle you on the spot."

She nodded her head, and with uncertain steps followed him.

He closed the door noiselessly, and, beckoning her still, strode on, the heavy rain pouring down upon his bare head, and soaking through his thin evening dress.

* * * * *

Twenty minutes afterwards the shadow of Maurice Durant's former self stole up the stairs he had so short a time since run down so lightly. His drenched clothes clung to his frozen form, his face was white and set like a dead man's, the lips livid and bleeding, and his eyes as bloodshot as a drunken man's.

Slowly, as if each step cost him pain, he

gained the gallery, and there, panting and quivering, stood listening to the music as a lost soul in torment might strain to catch the angelic melody streaming from the gates of the Paradise from which he was eternally banished.

The music ceased.

The light forms of the dancers passed him as he shrank into a dark corner—passed, and were gone.

Yet one more came—the woman he loved.

His clenched teeth bit deeper into the livid lips till the blood dropped on to his shirt front and down his hands; his clasped hands pressed harder against his heart.

Yet he spoke not a word, though "Maud! Maud!" seemed wailing from the sky, shrieking from the floor, wailing from every side of the gallery.

He almost fancied he had called her, but no, she looked round the gallery with a troubled, wistful gaze, and passed on.

He watched her till the last scrap of her gay dress was lost, and then stole out and noiselessly gaining the higher stairs entered his room, a spacious apartment handsomely furnished, as befitted a guest who had wrought the Hall so much good.

Going to the window, he threw it open and thrust his face out into the driving rain that beat upon it as it beat upon the senseless oaks around the Rectory.

Half an hour passed, then he left the window and walking to a bureau at the end of the room opened one of its drawers.

A pile of bank notes were lying in one corner.

These he thrust into his breast—then pulled open another drawer, and drew out a revolver.

As his hand clasped the cold stock for the first time his face changed, and his eyes fell upon it with a greedy, wistful expression.

He laid it down on the table and walked to

the window, but he could not take his eyes from it, and gradually, step by step, returned to the table and picked the weapon up again.

With calm deliberation he looked at the priming.

It was loaded.

He cocked it, and then turned it over and over mechanically.

The barrel was pointed to his head. His finger trembled.

Another moment—another movement—and his soul would have sped to its account, but before the movement came the music burst out again, and his hand fell to his side and with a start he laid the weapon on the table. For a few minutes he stood listening to the waltz, then opened the door of the other room, and in five minutes returned to the first, attired in his old rough shooting-suit, with his gun in his hand and his cloak over his arm.

Then, extinguishing the light, he stole down by a back staircase and gained the terrace.

The stables lay beyond this, and he must reach them unseen.

Waiting for a few minutes in the pitch darkness, he crept along out of the reach of the lights from the window and got to the stables unseen.

Forcing open one of the doors, he took down a lighted lantern from a hook and saddled one of the horses. Then he stole round to the small pent-house at the back that had been erected over a kennel.

As his footsteps approached it the dog Tigris sprang out with a whine of recognition, but a whispered word quieted it, and it stood as still as a stone while his master unfastened its chain, and followed upon his footsteps like a panther as if it knew—as it assuredly did—that secrecy was required.

Replacing the lantern, and leading the horse out, Maurice Durant gave a low call

to the dog, vaulted into the saddle, and rode off across the meadow toward the high road, the pelting rain beating upon his white, death-like face as if it meant to tear it to pieces.

CHAPTER IX.

" Truth will come to light : murder cannot be hid long."

" Here, in the darkness, such a deed was done
As fills the night with awe and dread.
Here in the night, across the rabbits' run,
The blow was struck that left her dead."

THE morning after the ball the sun shone out brightly, and the sky was as calm and clear as if a cloud had never dimmed it.

Maud and Sir Fielding were seated at the breakfast table, talking over the events of last night, or rather the early morning, when Sir Fielding's valet knocked, entered, and, advancing with some embarrassment, said :

" Mr. Durant is not in his room, nor has his bed been slept in. I have his letters here, sir."

"Dear me," said Sir Fielding, not very much astonished, for Maurice Durant was wont to be uncertain in his movements, while Maud turned pale and set down the coffee cup she was filling. "Dear me, have you sent any one over the grounds?"

"Yes, Sir Fielding, for one of these letters is marked 'important,' but no one can find him."

"The Rectory?" said Maud.

"I have been over there, miss, myself," replied the valet, "but Mr. Durant has not slept there, nor has he been there this morning."

Sir Fielding looked puzzled, and as the man laid the letters on the table and left the room he said:

"When did you see him last, my darling?"

"Last night, papa," said Maud, turning pale. "I left him in the gallery, where we had gone to rest for a little while, and I have not seen him since."

"It's very strange," said Sir Fielding, rising

and walking to the window, then back to the fire. "I'll go up into his room, I think."

As he walked to the door a footman entered and said that the foreman of the workmen at the Rectory had arrived to see Mr. Durant by appointment.

"Mr. Durant is not here, say, Thomas," said Sir Fielding. "I—I really don't know what to do. Ask him to wait a little," and, forgetting that he had intended going up to Maurice Durant's room, he returned to the fireplace and stood rubbing his hands irresolutely.

Maud sat still and pale, her coffee and the rest of the breakfast untouched.

"Have you found him, papa?" she asked, tremulously.

"No, no, my dear," he said, adding, with a reassuring smile, "He has gone for a book in the library, perhaps, or a walk; depend upon it he will be here directly. You know nothing is strange that Maurice Durant does."

Maud thought the suggestion of the walk was

a correct one, and regained something of her colour, but was still rather troubled.

Sir Fielding, quite reassured, took his chair again and went on with his breakfast.

Presently another knock came to the door, and the footman said that the head stableman wished to speak with Sir Fielding.

"Now?" said Sir Fielding, looking puzzled.

The man had never made such a request before. Could he want to give warning?

"He says he wants to see you immediately, Sir Fielding," said the footman, and Sir Fielding nodding, the stableman entered.

"I'm sorry to intrude and trouble you, sir," he said, respectfully, and with some excitement, "but there's been a robbery down at the stables."

"A robbery!" exclaimed Sir Fielding. "Nonsense."

"Yes, but there has, sir. The East stable door be broken open and the brown cob be gone."

"What!" exclaimed Sir Fielding, scarcely believing his ears.

"It be, sir," said the man; "and, what be more, Maister Durant's dawg, Tigris, have gone as well."

Maud rose, trembling.

Sir Fielding set down his coffee-cup with a sudden crash.

"Brown cob—Tigris—gone! There's some mistake, Norton, surely."

"No, there bean't, unfortunately, sir," replied the man, with earnest civility. "There bean't no mistake. The cob's gone, and the dawg, and, by token, I can trace the cob's footmarks across the lawn and the meadow."

Sir Fielding looked troubled and startled.

"What — what does it all mean? A robbery! I can scarcely believe it. Some one has taken the cob—some of the guests, Norton."

"'Tain't likely, Sir Fielding," said the man.

"There was plenty o' carriages. Besides, they wouldn't ha' broke the lock of the stable door to get at 'im. They'd ha' called me or one o' the grooms."

Sir Fielding paced the room.

"I will go and look at it," he said. "Meanwhile, Maud, ring the bell and tell one of the men to ride off to the police-station, at Warrington. A robbery! I can scarcely believe my ears," and he left the room followed by the head groom.

Before he had reached the back of the hall Barber, the keeper, opened the end door and burst in as white as a ghost, without his gun or his cap.

Seeing Sir Fielding he stopped, panting and breathless, and pulled a tuft of his rough, curly hair.

Sir Fielding stared.

"What on earth's the matter, Barber? Have you found the cob?"

"The cob!" exclaimed the gamekeeper,

looking from Sir Fielding to the groom in astonishment. "What cob? I didn't know one was lost! I have come to tell you summut dreadful has happened in the wood, Sir Fielding."

Sir Fielding glanced back quickly at the breakfast-room, and the groom, understanding the look, walked back and shut the door.

"Now," said Sir Fielding, who had grown pale, "what is it, Barber? Speak low—Miss Maud is in that room."

"I won't let her hear, Sir Fielding," said the man. "Perhaps you'll step outside, sir."

They walked out on to the terrace, and then, Sir Fielding with a gesture of impatience telling him to go on, the man drew a long breath and said:

"It's summut very dreadful, Sir Fielding. They've been and took it to the station at Annsleigh, and the police was coming to the Hall right upon my heels."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Sir Fielding, still paler. "What is dreadful? What have they taken to the station?"

"A woman, Sir Fielding. I found her myself first thing this morning, lying face upwards in the Black Pool, wi' a great ugly stab in her bosom."

Sir Fielding staggered, and clung to the terrace.

"A woman—dead! murdered! Good God! Tell me all."

"There ain't much to tell, Sir Fielding," said the man. "I was going to the preserves early this morning to see what damage the storm had done the young trees, and, passing the Black Pool, noticed something white lying in the middle of it. When I got near it gave me a regular shock to see as how it was a woman's head just a-floating like a cork, all white and set like. I started off running, crying for help, and run against the inspector of the police, as was in the lane. He went back with

me, and atween us we managed to get her out. She was quite dead—been dead for hours, the inspector said—and had a great slit in her bosom—here," and Barber struck his chest. "The inspector he went for some men, and they carried it on a stretcher to Annsleigh. I went wi' 'em, and as soon as I heard that they were going to send some men to the Hall, I tore away to give you warning, for fear Miss Maud——"

"I see, I see," said Sir Fielding, faintly, pressing his hand to his forehead, and feeling cold with dread.

Maurice Durant missing, the cob and dog gone, the corpse of a murdered woman found floating in the Black Pool! Great God! what did it all mean? Was there any connection——

Shudderingly he put the fearful thought away, and, telling Barber to watch and tell him when the police arrived, he returned to

the breakfast-room, and, trying to look unconcerned, said :

"The cob's gone, I'm afraid, Maud. It's a great pity to lose one of the best horses in the stables."

"And the dog, papa," she said, anxiously, going up to him and placing her trembling hand upon his arm.

"The dog—eh ? Oh, yes, running about the grounds somewhere, most likely chasing the rabbits. My dear, I wish you would go up to your aunt's room a little while. I have some business to do with one or two men."

His voice faltered, and she looked up at him with a terrified, questioning look ; but he managed to smile, and, still with the anxious expression upon her face, she, ever obedient, glided from the room and up the stairs.

Scarcely had she gone than Barber knocked at the door, and Sir Fielding, opening it, walked

into the hall, and met the inspector and two policemen.

"Good morning, Sir Fielding," said the inspector, respectfully. "I suppose you have heard of this terrible affair?"

Sir Fielding nodded.

"I have just heard," he said.

"You being the nearest magistrate, Sir Fielding, we have come up immediately for a warrant for the inquest."

Sir Fielding started.

"Ah, yes; I had forgotten," he said, with a sigh of relief. "Follow me into the library, will you?"

They followed him into the library, and, sitting down, Sir Fielding wrote out the warrant.

"There it is," he said. "Now have you time to tell me all you know of this affair?"

The inspector very willingly repeated all that Barber had said, and wound up with:

"She must ha' been dead directly the stab

was given. It was a mighty deep cut—pierced her lungs like, I suppose."

Sir Fielding hid his eyes, and shuddered.

"Have you a clue to her identity, or to the—the murderer?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Not as yet, Sir Fielding," said the man. "We have telegraphed for Mr. Crawshaw, the detective, and expect him by the next train. He'll find it out quick enough, I'll warrant. He's the cleverest detective going, Sir Fielding."

"And the identity?"

"Not a trace. She is an Italian, by her look, and a great drinker, Dr. Martin says. He saw her as she was lying at the station, directly we'd brought her in."

"Any money found on her?" asked Sir Fielding.

Not a penny, for a good reason," said the inspector, significantly.

"Why?" asked Sir Fielding.

"Pockets turned inside out," replied the inspector, meaningly.

"Ah!" said Sir Fielding, and breathed a sigh of relief, though from what he could scarcely tell.

CHAPTER X.

"Thus heavenly hope is all serene,
But earthly hope, how bright soe'er,
Still fluctuates o'er this changing scene,
As false and fleeting as 'tis fair." HEBER.

WHEN the men had gone, Sir Fielding called the gamekeeper into the library.

"Take the mare," he said, "and ride into Warrington. You know Mr. Durant? Well, describe him at the inn on the road, and at the hotel, and ask if they have seen him. If they have, learn which way he has gone, and follow him hard and fast."

"The mare is a match for the cob at any time, an easy match with the cob half worn out," he murmured.

"Then, after a pause, added aloud:

"If you cannot hear of him on the road,

ride on to the station and inquire if he went up by last night's express or the early train this morning. There are usually very few passengers, and the station-master cannot fail to have noticed him. If he has, return to me as fast as the mare can bring you."

Barber touched his hair respectfully, and Sir Fielding saw him from the corridor bound down the terrace towards the stable like a sleuth-hound.

Scarcely had he gone than Lady Mildred entered the room.

"What is the matter, Fielding?" she said, with some astonishment. "Maud tells me some disjointed tale about Maurice Durant not having slept here last night, and having fled no one knows whither; and I saw, from one of the upper windows, the inspector and two of his men walking down the road. Whatever is it?"

"Nothing—nothing, my dear Mildred," said Sir Fielding, hurriedly. "At least, nothing

that concerns you or Maud. There has been an accident in the wood, but it has nothing to do with Maurice Durant or his absence."

"But is he really absent?" asked Lady Mildred, divining from Sir Fielding's pale face that something more had happened than he would have her think, and, womanlike, pressing the question.

"Missing! No," said Sir Fielding, querulously. "Would you call me missing if I had walked into the village?"

"Oh, if he has only gone into the village I will go and comfort Maudie," said Lady Mildred. "She is terribly alarmed. It was as much as I could do to keep her from following me down."

"Yes, yes. Go to her, my dear Mildred, and tell her that I wish her to stay in her own or your room for a little while. People are coming to see me about the accident, and I do not wish it to reach her ears—you understand, Mildred?"

"Quite, Fielding," replied her ladyship, and went upstairs again.

Sir Fielding commenced pacing the room with troubled footsteps, vainly striving to cast from him the feeling of dread which settled upon his spirits like a dark cloud.

He knew that Barber must be some hours ere he could return, even supposing that he met with tidings of Maurice Durant, or Maurice Durant himself. Yet he was already burnt up with impatience, and dared not leave the library for fear that Maud might see his pale, anxious face, and wring the story of the discovery from him.

He tried to read, but found that the words of his favourite classic ran together in meaningless lines, and in despair he took to walking up and down again.

Two hours passed; then there came a knock at the library door, and Thomas entered.

"A gentleman is waiting in the hall to see you sir," he announced.

"A gentleman?" said Sir Fielding. "Does he give his name?"

"No, sir, he will not. Says you don't know him, but begs you will see him on a matter of importance."

"Show him in," said Sir Fielding, the troubled look growing more marked upon his face, and Thomas ushered in a stout, comfortable-looking man, of half-gentlemanly, half-tradesman appearance. He was dressed in a dark suit of Oxford tweed, wore particularly well-got-up linen, and had a nicely-tied satin scarf round his neck. His face was not particularly good-looking or decidedly plain, but there was a something about it that lent it a peculiar, birdlike expression that puzzled one. After two or three minutes' conversation one discovered that the something was a pair of dark, steely eyes, sharp as a needle, and glittering like an eagle's.

When he entered the sharp eyes flashed

round the room, and took in every corner and peculiarity of it at a glance.

Sir Fielding pointed to a seat.

"You asked to see me, I think?"

"Sir Fielding Chichester?" said the man, cautiously, replying to Sir Fielding's question by another.

"I am Sir Fielding Chichester," he said.

"Thank you, sir. Thought so, but it's always best to make sure. Yes, I did ask to see you. I have just come from Annsleigh Police Station —I may say from London. My name is Crawshaw, Detective Police, Scotland Yard."

Sir Fielding started.

"Already!"

Mr. Crawshaw smiled.

"Telegraph took a quarter of an hour in transmission. Reached me in time to catch the down train. Started at once. Always ready to start at a minute's notice, and was at Annsleigh and in full possession of what particulars could be got half an hour ago."

All this with a quiet air of power and self-possession, tinged with respect.

Sir Fielding was astounded.

"It is marvellous," he said, "how any one escapes with such a system against him."

Mr. Crawshaw shook his head.

"It is, sir, it is. But they are too many for us sometimes. And now, sir, we'll get this affair over as soon as possible. I'm taking up your time."

He might more justly have said that he was losing his; but Sir Fielding understood him, and said:

"In what way do you want my assistance? I presume you do want it by——"

"Coming here," finished the detective. "Just so. Well, it's just this, Sir Fielding. We from Scotland Yard, when we are on the scent, often find clues from the most unlikely things, so we've always got our eyes and ears open to whatever turns up. Now, while Brandon, the inspector—an excellent man, Sir Fielding—

was putting me in possession of the facts of this affair, and we were looking at the body, one of his men, a talkative, gossiping sort of a fellow that'll never make a good officer, began chattering about the ball here last night. The inspector would have stopped him, but at a sign from me let him alone. Well, this man, it seems, had been gossiping with one of your servants—the man who let me in, if I'm not mistaken—his name's Thomas."

Sir Fielding nodded and sank into a chair with a feeling of uneasiness. What was this legal bloodhound aiming at?

"I thought so," continued Mr. Crawshaw, "from the description. He had been gossiping with him while on duty this morning, and heard that one of your guests, who had been staying at the house for some months past, had disappeared suddenly last night."

Sir Fielding rose from his chair, and was about to speak, but remained silent and sat down again.

The detective took keen note of every motion and expression, then continued :

"Now, Sir Fielding, I needn't ask you to excuse a man for doing his duty. Duty's duty, however painful, and to investigate this murder's my duty, and, I may add, a painful one, for I can pretty clearly see—— However, to go on. This man, with a little pressing, also informed me that your footman had told him that a woman, answering to the description of the deceased, came up to the Hall here last night, and asked for the missing guest, Mr. Maurice Durant."

Sir Fielding rose, as white as ashes.

"No, no!" he exclaimed, faintly. "It cannot be—there is some mistake. The man was speaking falsely!"

The detective raised his eyebrows.

"A very reasonable remark, Sir Fielding. and a very knowing one, if you'll allow me to use the word. It's a safe line to believe every man false till you've proved him true.

Now, we can test my man's assertion in five minutes, if you will have the extreme kindness to touch the bell and send for your man Thomas."

Sir Fielding, too stunned to move, pointed to the bell, and the detective, with the stealthiness that characterised all his movements, rose and rang it.

Thomas appeared to answer it.

"Better shut the door, sir, eh?" hinted the detective.

Sir Fielding nodded, and Mr. Crawshaw rose, as stealthily as before, and closed it.

"Now, shall I ask a few questions, or will you, Sir Fielding?" he said, respectfully.

Sir Fielding, by a gesture, intimated that he might do so, and, supporting his head on his hand, gazed anxiously at the two men.

"Your name is Thomas——"

"Gibbes, sir," said the footman, suddenly growing uneasy and frightened.

Mr. Crawshaw, seeing this with a glance of his grey eyes, modulated his voice to a soothing softness.

"Been in Sir Fielding's service long?"

"Nearly seven years, sir," replied the man, looking at Sir Fielding appealingly.

"Seven years. And expect a good character, eh?" asked Mr. Crawshaw.

The footman hoped His Honour would say a kind word for him, if so be he came to leave. Had always done his best, etc.

"Very good," said Mr. Crawshaw; then, with a sudden sharpness: "You opened the door to the person—the female who came last night, or rather this morning, and inquired for Mr. Maurice Durant?"

"I did," said the footman, looking startled.

"You did. Well, just tell Sir Fielding and me what occurred, will you? Take your time, and have the goodness to stick to the simple facts."

The man paled and flushed by turns at the

keen, hard tone and still keener gaze of his questioner, and commenced :

"It was nigh upon one o'clock this morning, when, going into the hall for some ice, I heard a knocking at the door. At first I thought it was the wind, and, thinking the company would have a wet journey home, I was about to return upstairs, when the knocking sounded louder. I put down the ice-pail and opened the door, and saw a woman standing against it, shrinking, as one may say, from the rain. She was rather tall and very shabby dressed, and drenched to the skin, and—and——"

"Speak out," said Mr. Crawshaw, decisively. "Sir Fielding is anxious to hear it all."

"Well, I thought by the look of her that she was half drunk, and was a-going to tell her to go round to the basement door, thinking as she was begging and had mistaken the entrance, when she asked for Mr. Durant——"

Sir Fielding started to his feet, but, at a

gesture from the detective, sat down again, and hid his face in his trembling hands.

"Go on," said Mr. Crawshaw, soothingly.

"Well, as she didn't speak very distinct like——"

"What do you mean?—how?" broke in the detective, sharply.

"Well, foreign-like, and also like one that had had a little drop to drink."

The detective nodded.

"I thought I'd misunderstood her, and I asked her, rather sharp like, what she said. 'I want to see Mr. Durant,' she says, and, wondering whether I was doing right, I asked her to step in. She came in, shivering and shaking, and seemed dazed like at the lights and stupid, and when I looked over the bannisters, going up to tell Mr. Durant, I see that instead of sitting down on the hall chair she'd crept into a corner."

"Go on," said the detective, with a curious downward look in his keen eyes.

"I was nigh upon five minutes finding Mr. Durant, but I come upon him in the gallery and I told him that a woman—no, I remember I didn't say a woman, I said a person——"

"Ah!" said the detective between his teeth.

"'A person wanted to see him.' He looked astonished like and shrugged his shoulders, as he does when he's surprised. 'I?' he says. I told him she'd asked for him and then he asked me 'If I was sure?' and when I said I was, he run down the stairs lightly, humming one of the tunes he plays on the organ."

"Go on," said the detective.

"Well, sir, I went on to the drawing-room to serve the coffee, and—and I haven't seen Mr. Durant since."

Sir Fielding looked up, and his trembling lips seemed formed to speak; but the detective said hastily, as if to prevent him:

"Do you think you should know the female who called and asked for Mr. Durant last night?"

"I am sure I should," said the man, confidently.

"Why?" asked the detective, sharply. "You say you only saw her for five minutes, if so long. The night was dark as pitch. How do you feel so certain, eh?"

"Because I had a good look at her face. It wasn't like the faces you see about here, but foreign and dark-like, with black, bloodshot eyes. Besides, the hall lamps were shining full upon it all the time she was standing there."

"Good," said the detective. "Now do you think you can keep a still tongue in your head about this affair, eh? Not spread it all over the servants' hall, hem?"

The man looked over to Sir Fielding, appealingly, and Mr. Crawshaw, at a gesture from Sir Fielding, abruptly nodded, to signify that he had finished, and Thomas Gibbes withdrew.

Immediately he had gone the detective

rose, and, in cold yet still respectful tones, said:

"Sir Fielding, duty is duty. I must see Mr. Durant's room."

Sir Fielding started.

"Surely," he breathed, "you don't suspect——"

"I never do suspect anything or anybody. I don't presume to do it, Sir Fielding, but I know when I've got a clue, or think I have."

Sir Fielding walked to the door and then back again to the calm, immoveable blood-hound.

"Is it imperatively necessary that you should see the room?"

The man nodded.

"It's my duty, Sir Fielding, my duty."

"Stay one moment," said Sir Fielding, faintly, and he walked to a cabinet, took out a decanter and some glasses, filled two of the latter, and pointing to one, drank the contents of the other.

The detective stealthily took up the glass, muttered the usual good wishes, and tossing the spirit down, noiselessly set the glass upon the table again.

"Now," said Sir Fielding, "I — I am ready. I will go with you," and he ascended the stairs, followed closely by Mr. Crawshaw.

When he reached the corridor leading, as Sir Fielding informed him, to the suite of apartments occupied by Maurice Durant, the detective at every step scrutinised the rich carpet, and every foot of the wall.

Stopping before the door of the dressing-room, Sir Fielding was about to open it, but the detective, with a muttered apology, seized his hand, and kneeling down, carefully examined the handle.

Sir Fielding, feeling sick and faint, said not a word, and, apparently satisfied with his examination, the detective opened the door himself and entered.

Here his movements were as strange as they were outside.

First he dropped upon his knees, and passed his hand over the carpet by the door, carefully examining his hand at each foot. Then he looked at the table cloth, and next his sharp eyes resting upon the bureau, he carefully opened the drawers.

In the first one the open empty inlaid cash-box attracted his attention, and he took it out, and laid it upon the table.

In the next the revolver caused him to tighten his lips, and he whispered, "Loaded," with a significant twinkle of his gray eyes.

Then he examined the stock minutely, and laid it by the cash-box.

"Now for the next room," he said, musingly, and kneeling down as before examined the handle.

Sir Fielding, cold as ice, stood watching him.

Rising from his knees, the detective cau-

tiously opened the door, but this time did not stop to examine the carpet, for the heap of dress clothes lying on the floor had caught his eyes, and he at once went silently towards it.

They were still wet, hanging heavy and limp in his light grasp.

With a gleam in his keen eyes, he carried them to the window, and commenced going over them with a small magnifying glass.

Coat, waistcoat, trowsers. Then, placing them on the bed, he stooped and took the shirt, and as he did so turned to Sir Fielding, and pointed to three distinct drops of blood upon the soiled, damp frills!

Sir Fielding started with horror, and fell against the door post.

The detective stole to the window, and opened it for a little air; then, taking a small taper from his pocket, lighted it, and by its means melted some sealing-wax, with which he sealed each door and window, putting three large seals upon the outer one.

Then he nodded towards the stairs, and Sir Fielding, wondering whether he was asleep and dreaming some hideous dream, walked down with the bloodhound behind him.

The library gained, the old man sank into a chair and bowed his head upon his hands.

The detective's voice aroused him. It was cold and sharp:

"Sir Fielding, I must ask you for a warrant for the apprehension of Maurice Durant on suspicion of murder!"

Sir Fielding sprang to his feet.

"No, no!" he gasped. "Evidence insufficient —I—I——"

"Many a man has been hung on half as much, Sir Fielding," replied the detective, coolly. "The footman's story, the wet clothes, and, —— Sir Fielding, it is mistaken kindness to conceal the fact from you—there was blood upon every door-handle, the stock of the pistol and the cash-box, a drop or two wherever he had laid his hands!"

Sir Fielding uttered a groan, which, before it had died away, was echoed in a voice that sent the life-blood from his heart, and Maud, white as the corpse lying in the dead-house, glided from behind the curtains.

The detective uttered an exclamation. Sir Fielding started forward.

But Maud, with her cold, icy hand, pushed him back.

Moistening her dry, livid lips, she said, in a voice that seemed like one from the grave:

"Papa, issue the warrant. I will pledge my life that Maurice Durant is no murderer."

Sir Fielding caught at her arm, but she shook him off, and stood staring at the detective.

"Issue the warrant. I, who love him better than my immortal soul, command you!"

Sir Fielding, trembling like a leaf, sat down at the desk, and acting under the influence of the outstretched hand, wrote out in shaking characters the warrant for the apprehension, on the charge of murder, of the man who had

saved him from ruin and won his daughter's heart.

As the detective took it from his trembling hand and put it in his pocket, the heroic girl staggered and fell into her father's arms.

* * * * * *

The next morning the chase had commenced, the bloodhounds were on the scent.

But it was soon lost, and they hesitated and got astray.

Large rewards were offered, descriptions of the supposed murderer's person were posted all over the kingdom, every town and village searched, London scoured, but to no purpose. The fugitive had got clear away, and the hounds were at fault.

That he was the murderer only a few had even doubts. There had been some story of a strange foreign-looking man inquiring his way to Grassmere, at the same wayside inn at which the woman had stopped, but no one attached any importance to that. What did

that solitary fact weigh against the wet clothes, the blood-stains, the actually proved meeting of Maurice Durant and the deceased?

The pockets being turned inside out was no evidence in his favour, the police decided. It was a commoun ruse, when the deed of blood was actuated by feelings of revenge or passion, to empty the pockets, in the hope of misleading the detectives, and throwing them off the scent.

Another link in the mysterious chain of circumstances had also been found. Mr. Crawshaw, in a search he had instituted in every part of the Hall, had come upon a small picture which was proved to bear a striking likeness to the face of the murdered woman, and Sir Fielding, on being asked about it, distinctly remembered that Maurice Durant had nearly swooned at the sight of it the first night he had visited the gallery.

No, public opinion declared him the murderer, and once public opinion makes its declaration it is difficult to change it.

Even Sir Fielding and Lady Mildred had their doubts, though they strove hard against them; but Maud—gentle, loving Maud—declared, delirious or conscious, as she lay on her sick-bed, his innocence night and day, and called Heaven to witness it.

For the first week after the terrible scene in the library they had despaired of her life, and Sir Fielding had telegraphed for Chudleigh and Carlotta; but she had fought hard against her agony and delirium, and the doctors declared that, though she would not be out of danger for some time, Chudleigh's return might save her.

They said this to Sir Fielding, but to themselves they spoke of no hope, and entertained none.

CHAPTER XI.

"Oh, weary heart, that longeth for the day!
Oh, weary heart, that panteth for the night's still breath!
Where lies the succour? where the solace? Say!
Death! It answers, sadly, Death!

"Yea, were I lying where the sea sand lies,
A thousand lengthy fathoms deep,
That voice would wake me from eternal sleep,
And, like the last trump, bid me rise."

WILL my readers graciously deign to seat themselves on the novelist's magic carpet, and let it carry them—whither?

To a wide expanse, limitless as far as the eye can see, a world of bright blue sky, spangled with stars, and lit up by a glorious moon, whose rays fall upon a boundless carpet of magnificent flowers.

Flowers to the right, flowers to the left,

flowers as far as the eye can reach: one boundless prairie of Heaven's earth-jewels, one splendid meadow, soft as velvet, dazzling as a cluster of precious gems, without an owner save the solitary trapper, the fleet-foot Indian, or the wild animals that browse upon its bosom, and fly across it with swift foot at the approach of man.

While we gaze, lost in wonder and awe, three specks appear in the grey horizon, and gradually grow nearer.

They are horsemen—rough, sturdy sons of the prairie and the mountain, tanned by the sun, hardened by the continual struggle for the necessaries of life, trained to deeds of daring by their incessant warfare with deadly and never-ending foes.

Attired in garments composed of rough calico, the hairy skins of the prairie wolf, and the tanned hide of the buffalo—the animal which provides them with both food and clothing—their rough heads covered by caps cut from the

hairy coat of the deadly grizzly bear, and their legs cased in mocassins, stripped from Indians that had fallen beneath their smooth, shining rifles, these Mexican trappers look fiercer than the beasts, and by the tawny sons of the forest are more dreaded.

Coming along at a speed which only a Mexican horse could maintain, and only a Mexican—the finest rider in the world—or a trapper could sit through, steed and rider seemed one: yet as they dash through the bright-hued flowers they could at a word bring their flying horses to a halt, and fling themselves from the saddle.

Beyond them, glistening in the rays of the summer moon, lay the Rocky Mountains, whose summits are always hoary with eternal snow, whose holes and caves are the homes of the fearful grizzly bear.

Making direct for this high range of mountains, the three riders skirted a little to the left, and suddenly pulling up beside a bright

shallow stream, which meanders through low rocks and round the base of a clump of dark trees, leapt from their horses, and two of them commenced, without a moment's delay, to cut down some dry branches wherewith to make a fire, while the third fastened the bridles of the horses by means of pegs driven into the ground with one heavy blow of his axe.

While one tended the fire, heaping up branch after branch, and piling stones round it in the shape of a round stove or grate, the other two unsaddled the horses, took from the capacious saddle-bags some dried buffalo hams and bread, and proceeded to erect a gipsy tripod over the crackling blaze.

From this tripod they suspended a piece of rope, and stuck huge slices of the buffalo meat upon a hook attached.

This done, and three flasks filled from the stream, the men threw themselves down beside the fire—their rifles close at hand, and watched their supper cooking.

Neither of them had spoken as yet, each going through his allotted share of the work with taciturn earnestness, but now that they were stretched at full length, one of them —the tallest—looked up, and addressing the man who had been tending the fire, said :

"Carlos, how came you to miss the old one ?"

"Ask it when you see it—I can't tell. I'm not used to running 'em ; eh, Bill ?"

"Yer ain't," replied the third curtly, his keen eyes, lank jaw, and nasal accent proclaiming him a Yankee, though he rode, shot, and hunted with the same daring and excellence as his Mexican companions. "It's lucky Alph pricked the cow, or we'd a-gone supperless to-night, I guess."

"There are more buffaloes this side of the mountains ?"

"I calkerlate not ; they air due south now. Thar's only grizzlies and a brownie now and then up yer."

"Hum!" grunted the Mexican called Alph. "I have seen the Great Hunter drop one on this very spot."

"Ay, ye might, but why?" retorted the Yankee. "Why, cos he'd druv em from the south. Yer may star, but I'm speakin' tarnal truth. I've seen him hunt a herd 'cross the flow'r prairie till they were druv to the mountains, and there pick his bull and drop him."

"The Great Hunter can do every thing. Dost mind, Alph, when he dropped the grizzly up beyond the hills?"

"Ay, ay," reiterated Alph. "That were nearly my last b'ar."

"Tell," said the Yankee, curtly.

"Carlos speaks of the time when I joined the trappers down south for buffalo hide and beaver. 'Twere their second trip—and winter. We had hailed up stream from the east without luck to speak of, and parted in couples to spread out. Carlos and I were lotted

off together. We started for the pine forest, while the snow was coming down like lumps of ice.

"At night we crept beneath the drifts, and covered our heads with our cloak, for fear lest the snow should get to our insides and freeze our hearts. Two days of this, and the horses died; we ate 'em, and got on by tramping. Third day Carlos dropped a red doe, which lasted us another night, creepin' in 'tween the warm skin. Next day we got astray, and was for turning off or back—the snow had ceased—when I heard a roar, and next minute a grizzly was coming down on me. There was not time to do more than fire, but I lodged a bullet in his shoulder. It didn't stop him—worried him up more likely, for he came down like thunder, and got me in his arms. Carlos had no more powder; my rifle was beneath me. I said an ave, and gave up quietly; but just as the animal were choking me off, I heard a shout, and looking up, saw

a trapper riding a tall b'est come dashing up. He was afeared to fire, for the b'ar was twisting round, and he might have dropped me as likely as the grizzly, but when he came close he leapt down, and swinging his axe round his head, struck the b'ar 'cross the nozzle.

"It dropped me like a hot coal, and turned on him, but he, quick as lightning—I never never saw it better done — out with a long bowie, and ripped the beast up. Before the claws did more than take the skin off his back it dropped dead as a nail.

"When I come to he was gone, but Carlos had seen him before—there's no forgetting him —and said it was the Great Hunter."

The Yankee took down one of the slices and commenced eating, the others following his example.

"Seen him since?" he asked, after five minutes' eating and staring at the fire.

Carlos nodded.

"Aye, thrice. Once with a couple of redskins tracking a painter, once scouring across the hills after deer, and another time sitting beside a stream watching for beaver. Always alone, excepting for the dog—dog never away."

"I remember once," said Alph, taking a flask of spirit from his pocket, and, after drinking from it, handing it to his companions; "I remember once, when the Reds were on the war trail, that if one mentioned the Great Hunter's name they uttered a yell. He never misses, never forgets, and shows no mercy to a foe. But a friend—well, it ain't a grizzly or a handful of redskins that will stop the Great Hunter if one needs him."

"When did ye hear o' un last?" asked the Yankee.

"Five years back, before the great flood. Since then no man has seen him. The redskins say a grizzly dropped him across yonder. Old Wabe, the gray-haired trapper, says he

lives still, and will come to the prairie once more; nay, more, Red Serpent swore by his father's grave that he saw him, this fall, down by the White River, snaring!"

"Can't believe Injuns," said the Yankee.

"Ay, truth never touches their tongue," replied the Mexican, filling a short wooden pipe with black York River, and lighting it with a brand.

The others followed his example, and soon the fragrant aroma of tobacco joined the smoke of the wood fire.

For half an hour they smoked in silence, then, one by one, they curled themselves up in their blankets and rolled over, grasping their deadly rifles, each to sleep.

Suddenly, before a couple of hours had elapsed, the American raised his head, and, lifting his rifle, sat up in a listening attitude.

The slight noise he made roused his companions, and in a second all three were lis-

tening intently, rifles grasped and eyes on the watch.

"Cayote," said the Mexican, meaning the prairie wolf.

The Yankee shook his head, and, listening for a few seconds longer, said, suddenly:

"It's a dog."

Instantly the three crept a little distance forward, and fell full length, with their rifles pointed in the direction of the noise, ready to strike death at a single shot, if need be.

Clearer and clearer came the peculiar blowing of the animal and the regular sound of its four feet upon the flower-ground, and in a few minutes a huge mastiff bounded at them, and gave forth a savage growl.

The next minute a horseman flashed into the bright moonlight, and, flying down towards the three trappers, called the dog with one sharp, ringing cry.

The dog bounded back, uttering a peculiar noise, and the horseman, evidently under-

standing it as a warning, pulled up short and half raised his rifle.

As they pointed their death-dealing weapons at his clearly defined form, they could see every feature in the bright moonlight.

"Ho-oh! Don't let him see a feather o' ye, or he's off. It's the Great Hunter!" whispered the Mexican, who had recognised him at a glance.

The horseman thus motionless was splendidly made, with a tall, lithe figure set off to the best advantage in the rough costume, half trapper, half Indian, the hair tufts to his legs and serafe flying in the wind, that also swept the long, black, wild, unkempt hair from his grand face, which was splendidly shaped, though much less tanned than a trapper's usually is, and bore marks of suffering and hardship in the dark lines round the stern mouth and deep-set, flashing eyes.

For three minutes he remained motionless; then, spurring his magnificent horse forward,

rode towards the object which had excited the dog's suspicion.

As he came close on to them the three men sprang to their feet, and, lowering their rifles, stood at his horse's head.

The Great Hunter, for that was the only name the trappers and Indians knew him by, raised his broad-brimmed Spanish hat and touched his breast sharply, while he called the dog to his side.

"How many?" he asked, in low, deep tones.

"Three," replied Carlos.

"Trapping?" asked the horseman.

"Hi," said the Yankee. "Air you for fur?"

The horseman shook his head, and pointed to the fire.

"Have you meat?" he said, wearily.

"Aye, aye!" said the three, eagerly, in a breath. "Buffalo steaks. Will ye join?"

The horseman nodded, and rode forward

towards the fire, the three men exchanging meaning glances as they followed.

Merely throwing the bridle across his horse's mane, the Great Hunter sat down beside the fire, silently looking at the steak which the Mexican, Alph, placed on the hook.

When it was done he ate about half of it, and gave the rest to the dog.

Then he rose, walked towards his horse, and returned to the fire with the bridle on his arm.

"If skins are what you seek," he said, addressing the three trappers, "try eastward, by the Squaw Fall; this is one from the Hollow," and, taking a valuable fur from his saddle-bag, he placed it on the spot from which he had just risen, and, with a graceful wave of his hand, sprang upon the horse, called to the dog, and rode away at a swift gallop.

"That's him," said the Mexican Alph, picking up the skin, "and that is always how he

goes. Never a word too much—and always a fur or a piece of gold."

And he crossed himself devoutly.

* * * * *

Meanwhile the horseman rode swiftly on, and gaining the thick pine forest, dismounted from his horse and entered it.

As he did so a panther sprang past him—the dog with a growl darting after it.

The huntsman's eyes lit up, and he raised his rifle.

A sharp clang, a fierce yell, and the panther dropped.

The hunter reloaded, calmly beat his way through the undergrowth, and knelt down beside the dead body, over which the dog was standing growling.

"A fine fur," he muttered. "'Twill serve to pay for another supper when food runs short."

With a sigh he took out his long bowie and commenced skinning the animal, occasionally

pausing in his task to listen to the howl of the wolves and the whiz of the bats.

When the skin was separated from the body, he flung it across the horse's back, wiped the bowie knife upon the high thick grass, and once more went on his way, the horse and dog following in his footsteps.

After half an hour's wandering round the thin part of the forest, the solitary huntsman emerged at the foot of a low range of hills.

A stream lay in his path.

Calling the dog to his side, and removing the saddle and skin from the horse, he swung them across his arm, and pushing aside a bush that hid the mouth of a cave, entered and threw down the saddle and the skin upon the floor, which was partly covered with dry grass and undergrowth.

Raking this together into a corner, the huntsman threw himself down at full length and closed his eyes.

But though he had ridden far and fast, and undergone enough hardship since he had last lain full length to weary an ordinary man to death, sleep would not visit him, and with a weary sigh he rose and wandered into the open air.

There, standing with his grand, sorrow-marked face towards the fast-falling stars, his thoughts found words, and unconsciously he murmured :

"Nearly two years! Who would have believed it so difficult to forget? It seems a lifetime since that short dream mocked me into a false happiness. Happy!—ah, was ever man happier? It was heaven on earth? Now," and he groaned as he looked round at the dark forest, the heavy mountains, and the drear stillness, broken only by the hard breathing of his dog, and the slight movement of his horse's hoofs amongst the grass—"now it is life and torture! Oh, God, that I might die! Thou knowest how I have

sought death in a thousand shapes, a thousand forms; thou knowest that I held my hand when I might have taken the life my mother cursed me with, but yet Thy mercy would not send by death's own hand the glad release from this never-ending agony, this never-dying memory of the past! Where is she now, I wonder? Is she dead? If so, perhaps from one of those stars she looks down and weeps for me. For surely her pitying heart cannot be glad if her gentle eyes can see me here, alone, praying for death that I may be near her, or find forgetfulness. Oh, Maud, Maud! if thou livest I pray Heaven to send thee happiness—I, who never prayed for myself, pray for thee—pray for thee!" and, dropping his head upon his heaving bosom, he closed his lips, muttering some indistinct words, walked slow back to the cave, and throwing himself upon the bed of fern and grass, once more sought sleep.

This time it came to him, and gradually the

lines upon his face softened, his mouth quivered, and he fell into a deep slumber.

Presently, however, he tossed from side to side, and his lips moved rapidly, and suddenly, with a groan, he sprang to his feet, and with starting eyes and white face cried, while he parted the tangled hair from his forehead :

"She called me! My Maud! I come!—I come!—I come!"

Still calling upon her name, with trembling fingers he saddled the horse, sprang upon its back, and darted across the plain as if the prairie behind him were on fire, and the flames already singeing his horse's hoofs.

CHAPTER XII.

"Nay, Death shall waite beside the door,
Nor slay, although he look her o'er."

"And they lived happy ever afterwards."
OLD FAIRY TALE.

THE rays of the setting sun stole through the lace curtains of the sick-room, and fell across the bed, and upon the group standing around.

Seated at the head, looking more beautiful than ever, though sad and sorrowful, was Lady Carlotta Chudleigh, her arm sustaining the pillow upon which rested the lily-like face of Maud.

On the other side of the bed stood Sir Fielding, his eyes moist, his lips quivering. The sad years that have passed over his head

since we saw him last have weighed down his shoulders, and turned his grey hair to a perfect white.

By him stands Chudleigh and Lady Mildred, both with wet eyes and sorrowful faces.

At a small table leans the physician, pouring out a dose of medicine.

Every minute or so he looks towards the bed, and then at his watch.

No one moves, and for some time no one speaks.

Then Sir Fielding walked noiselessly round the bed, and whispered tremulously to the physician.

The doctor shook his head.

"I cannot tell whether she is better or worse," he replied in a low voice. "She may lie like this for days without a change. When it comes, Sir Fielding, it will be the crisis — the turning point one way or the other."

"She is so weak," moaned the sorrowing father, while the tears coursed down his cheek.

The doctor shook his head regretfully.

"She is, she is," he said. "Who could be otherwise with so long and wasting an illness?"

Sir Fielding walked back, and the physician stole to the bedside and bent over the face, that might be an angel's before the sun quite set, and watched the lips closely.

"She has not spoken—the lips have not moved?" he asked of Carlotta, anxiously.

She shook her head sadly, and whispered back:

"No; she has not spoken since the night, a month ago, when she called for him."

* * * * * *

The same sun that smiled upon poor Maud's wasted face lit up the road from London, and fell in a bright, glorious stream of crimson upon a horseman, who, with the perspiration

pouring from his face, urged his steed with lash and spur almost to racing pace.

At the foot of a hill leading to the next town of Warrington he slackened pace—of a necessity—and, lifting his soft, wide-brimmed hat from his brow, muttered :

"Nightfall before I can reach it. What in Heaven's name possesses me? Am I mad? The people look at me as if they thought me so! What am I tearing like a demon along the road—what—— Ah, 'tis useless. How can I argue with the intense longing, the maddening desire to reach the place? Since the night I heard her call, the longing has consumed my soul like fire. If she be dead—— Away with the thought! or I shall be mad indeed."

Having reached the summit of the hill, he once more urged the horse at its full speed.

At a toll-gate the man, before he stooped to pick up the coin the bespattered horseman threw him, stared with astonishment;

the landlord of the wayside inn, a mile beyond, called his wife to stare after him; a passing waggoner shouted to him to stop; and a mounted patrol tried to bar his way; but, like a man riding for life, he looked neither to the right nor the left, but sped on.

The sun sank and the clouds of night rolled up thick and majestic.

The tired, jaded steed commenced to breathe painfully and falter at the bit; and, groaning aloud, its rider, at last obliged to acknowledge to himself that the animal could go no further, pulled up at the lighted window of a little cottage, and dismounted.

The next inn was a mile on. He must lead the exhausted steed on, and leave it there till it could be fetched. There was no fear of its straying—even now it staggered as it stood, and looked ready to fall.

While he stopped for one moment, deciding what course to pursue, the cottage

door opened, and a man walked hurriedly out, saying:

"Ah, doctor, you be come at last; only just in time—only just in time."

The horseman turned, and the man, seeing his mistake, touched his forehead, and, staring at the foaming steed, said:

"Beg pardon, your honour; but I thought it were the doctor. We have sent for him and the pairson, for a body as is likely not to need ayther on 'em if so be as they doan't come quick."

"Dying?" said the horseman, with a hesitating look that gave place to a groan as his conscience reminded him of his duty.

"Ay, nigh dead, sir. I'm thinking that he's only kept up through having made his mind up not to die till the pairson comes. He seems a good bit oneasy — somethin' on his mind loike—and do keep moanin' and squeemin' loike, that I do wish the pairson 'ud come."

The horseman's head sank upon his breast, then he looked at the horse and up the road wistfully, and, with an impatient sigh, said:

"I am a clergyman, my man. I will see the dying man if you wish."

"Thank 'ee, sir," said the man, evidently not expecting a clergyman in such mud-bespattered gaiters. "P'raps you'll walk this way, sir."

The traveller tied the bridle of the horse against the wooden fence, and followed the man into the cottage.

For some moments the dim light did not reveal the low bed and the dying man stretched upon it, and when the traveller saw them he removed his hat and walked towards its head.

A woman in the room at that moment stepped before the candle, and so thoroughly obscured the man's face.

When he heard the approaching footstep

the dying man raised himself on his elbow, and gasped :

"Are you the—priest ?"

The traveller started slightly at the voice.

"I am a clergyman," he said, gravely.

"Ah!" said the dying man. "Not a priest. What is the difference ? What—matters it ? Come closer. Soh! I—I am dying ; going fast. Fever—fever, starvation, and—are you listening ?—remorse ! Remorse ! 'Tis that's killing me before my time ! Remorse !" and, repeating the word again with an accent of agony, he fell back upon the bed.

The traveller stooped over him and tried to see his face—his own had grown strangely moved—but the light was still hidden.

Presently, while the man still lay recovering strength to speak, and the traveller stood watching, the door opened and two persons entered—the clergyman and the doctor.

The owner of the cottage hastily explained the state of affairs, and, bowing courteously

to the motionless figure at the head of the bed, they approached.

The doctor, bending down, took the dying man's hand; but, at his touch, he raised himself again, and, slowly shaking his head, gasped:

"Too late, too late! I—I—want the priest; the priest!"

At this the traveller drew back, and the priest, who had just entered, took his place.

"Father!" gasped the dying man, clutching at his hand.

"My son," replied the priest.

"I am dying—dying fast. Holy Mary, spare me until I have confessed. Father, listen—no, no, let them stay. I want them to hear. I want—— Listen! My name is Lorenzo Spazzola. Ah! who is that?" he gasped, as the traveller suddenly started, uttered a low cry, and bent forward for a moment.

"Nothing, my son; proceed," said the priest,

who had not noticed the cry at the announcement.

"I—I—am Lorenzo Spazzola, an Italian——"

Here he breathed hard, and, looking at the doctor, signed for him to write.

The doctor took out his note-book, and wrote down the statement word for word as it issued from the panting lips.

"I wish to confess, before I die, my sins, especially two great sins. I—Holy Mother! Father, I shall die before—before I—— Write, write! I am the husband of Felise Faustine, who died—was murdered—two years ago in the Black Pool at Grassmere! Write, write! Quick! Hold me up. I — we — plotted to marry her to a rich young Englishman. She was a fiend, a beautiful fiend, fond of drink, faithless. I was tired of her! He, a mere infant at Venice. She lived as his wife, and, maddened by her bad conduct, he fled from her. I planned this. I followed him to England, followed and tracked him. I forged

her certificate of death; took it to his house one stormy night. I—Holy Mother, give me breath, spare me—these—few moments. Felise, the woman, my wife, traced me here. She wanted to frighten the money from the Englishman, who believed himself to be her husband. She had heard he was to be married, and gave me the slip—came, tramped down to Grassmere, went up in the storm to the great house on the hill, saw him, got—him—to walk into the forest with her. I followed, and watched, watched them together in the soaking rain; saw him give her money, waited till he had gone"—here the man's voice grew excited and harsh—"tracked her footsteps, and," rising in the bed with uplifted arm, "ran my stiletto through her bosom!"

The priest started, the doctor turned pale, but the figure at the head of the bed stood like stone—immovable, motionless.

The dying man, with another effort, raised himself, and, fixing his fast-glazing eyes upon

the priest, continued more faintly, and with greater difficulty:

"I emptied her pocket of the gold, and—and dragged her body to the pool; then tramped back to London and hid. I knew I was safe," he went on, a cunning leer distorting his livid face. "I knew that they would fix the little business on him, and—ah! ah, they did, the idiots! He could not commit murder—though he fired on me once. They offered a reward for his apprehension—he had fled the night of the murder, thinking the woman was his rightful sposa—but they could not take him. No, no; Lucian is too fleet—too swift—to be tracked by such slow dogs! Father, that is all. You have written all, doctor? Give me the paper—hold my hand. I—I will s-i-gn it."

The two men, pale and petrified with horror, knelt down. One held the book, while the other supported the thin, wasted, blood-stained hand.

The murderer slowly penned his name, "Lorenzo Spazzola," and at the last letter sank back on the bed, struggling for the last gasp.

The priest hastily wrote his name as witness, and the doctor his; then the priest looked up, and said:

"Is there any other witness?"

The traveller, as if awakening from a trance, stepped forward.

"One more," he said, in hollow, broken tones.

"May I ask your name, sir?" said the priest.

"Maurice Durant," replied the deep voice, solemnly.

As its tones reached the dying man's ears, he sprang up in bed, and, with starting eyes, pointed his lean, quivering finger at the dark, sombre form.

"That's him," he shrieked, in an agony. "That's him—Lucian—Maurice—come at last!

I knew he would. He has come to take me away!"

With a long, despairing wail the blood-stained soul of Lorenzo Spazzola fled from its miserable tenement.

"Maurice Durant!" cried the Doctor, starting to his feet.

"Ay, Maurice Durant, sir," said the traveller, sternly. "Take charge of that confession, sir, as you would your own soul, and follow me to the nearest magistrate, Sir Fielding Chichester," and, dashing out, he leaped upon the priest's horse, which happened to be nearest the door, and sped away.

The doctor, bewildered and half-frightened out of his life, got upon the other and galloped after.

* * * * *

Maud's fair face still rested on Carlotta's soft bosom—the loved ones still stood watching round the bed.

The sun sank, the room grew dark, the

shaded lamp was lit, and the doctor grew anxious.

"The crisis is coming," he said, "coming quickly. If—if——"

"If what?" said Sir Fielding, almost mad with grief.

"If she calls for any one, and he or she is not here, or cannot be produced, I cannot answer for the consequences."

Sir Fielding groaned.

"What makes you think she will ask for some one?" he said, in a whisper.

"Because," replied the doctor, "she has always a wistful expression upon her face, a watching, waiting look, sometimes hopeful, sometimes despairing. See, now! I am inclined to think that—ahem—the person's absence has been the cause—not entirely, mind—but, the primary, principal cause of the danger. If I am right, she will immediately, in coming to consciousness, ask for him."

Sir Fielding hid his face in his hands,

and prayed. His agony was almost unbearable.

Chudleigh came and placed his hand on his shoulder, and whispered some words of comfort. "The worst had not come—she was still alive; while there was life there was hope," striving to gain consolation and strength from his own words.

And the sorrow-stricken father once more returned to the watching.

Presently Carlotta lifted her disengaged hand —the sign agreed upon between the doctor and herself—when Maud moved.

The doctor glided round and sank on his knees beside the bed.

"She opened her eyes for a second," said Carlotta, the tears streaming from her own.

The doctor nodded, and looked anxious.

"Sh—sh!"

The large, mournful eyes opened once more, and fixed themselves on Carlotta's face.

At that moment a noise was heard in the courtyard, and Sir Fielding turned angrily, fearful lest the slightest sound should disturb the beloved child, and bent forward.

Keeping her eyes fixed upon Carlotta's face, Maud murmured faintly:

"Has he come?"

Carlotta's tears dropped fast, and her bosom heaved.

"I dreamt he was coming — I heard his voice. I am sure he is coming. If he is alive he would not be so cruel as to let me die without kissing me; if he is dead, he is the angel Heaven is sending to carry me away, and I shall be in his arms, against his breast once more when I am dead——"

Sir Fielding hid his face.

Chudleigh sobbed like a child, while Lady Mildred left the room, unable to bear the scene any longer.

The sweet, faint voice died away, and the

thin, snow-white hands crossed themselves upon the lily-like breast.

They thought that Heaven had taken her, but Carlotta still held her against her bosom, and suddenly the large eyes opened again, and the lips sent forth a low wailing cry :

" Maurice ! Maurice !"

Before it had died away the door opened noiselessly, and a tall, mud-bespattered figure, with white face and flashing eyes, sprang toward the bed, thrust Carlotta away, and clasping the lovely form to his breast, murmured, with a flood of tears, in a voice broken with sobs,

" Maud—my darling—I am here !"

She fixed her eyes upon his face with a glad smile, and with an effort, placed her white arms round his neck, and leaning her face upon his breast, murmured :

" I knew Heaven would send you, Maurice, —I knew Heaven would send you alive !"

* * * * *

"Live!" exclaimed the doctor, half an hour afterwards, as he grasped Sir Fielding's hand, and wrung it nearly off in a vain attempt to keep the unprofessional tears back, "of course she will. There's no earthly reason why she shouldn't live to be as old as you or I."

* * * * *

We have a suspicion that all we say after this our readers will peruse somewhat impatiently. "When a man's tale is told," says an old proverb, "he should go and hang himself," but we feel within our heart that though very near our end, there is still a vestige of our task left unfinished, and novelists have their ideas of duty as well as other men.

Let us then, in almost as few words as we have needed for our apology, assure our readers that the doctor's words proved true, and that Maud Durant, with her husband, and a sweet-faced copy of herself can be found either at the Rectory or the Hall all

the year round. There will be no difficulty in finding them, for it is only needful to mention their names at any of the cottages for ten miles round to bring down a blessing upon their heads, and learn their abode.

The Retreat, too, the home of Mr. Chudleigh, not yet baronet, thank Heaven, Sir Fielding being as well and hearty as ever, having changed little save in transferring his love for his books to his little golden-headed Maud; who calls him "grandpapa," and is happier sitting on his knee than anywhere else—The Retreat, we say, is a well-known place, and the Right Honourable Mr. Chichester — he is a great statesman now—and Lady Carlotta are as well beloved, and very nearly as popular, as the Durants.

They have a bright-eyed girl and a Turk of a boy, who has already fallen in love with his cousin Maud, and generally addresses her as his little wife.

The Folly, that monstrosity which so long

annoyed Sir Fielding, exists no longer, having been purchased and pulled down by Mr. Durant, who is reported to be as rich as an Indian Nabob, and judging by the way in which his strong hand never falters in its magnificent charity to all who come within its reach, report this time does not speak falsely.

The former owners of the now vanished Folly have taken their wealth and pomposity to a well-known watering place, at which their two daughters, each "my lady" now, are the reigning queens. We hope the Gregsons are happy, but judging from the little experience we have had—not personal, we confess—of the sort of happiness enjoyed by persons who think it is only to be found in money and prosperity, we doubt it.

Master Tom has married the barmaid at the "Annsleigh Arms"—a showy girl, whose chief recommendation to him was her extreme weight and confidence,—and he has managed

to win a small handicap at a well-known race meeting.

Of course Mr. Gregson cut him off with a shilling, wrapped up in an anathema, and his mother and sisters are not allowed to hold any communication with him. But he does not care a "pony" for that, he says, and declares he is happy in his own way.

And, after all, no one can be more than that in this world.

THE END.

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